

Master's thesis

Utopian Freedom: Individual Freedom and Social Order
in Thomas More's *Utopia*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*
and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

By

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The thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the Master's program at The University of Agder and is therefore approved as such. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.

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Introduction

Authors of utopian narratives often put forward a harmonious society as an ideal. However, total harmony and agreement seem impossible in a diverse society. In order to achieve their utopian end, such narratives will have to reconcile individual freedom and social order. This may involve a regulating or restraining of human nature into social or political conformity, rather than mere modifications in the social order to accommodate the individual. I intend to investigate these contradictions in the utopian societies of *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy, and *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula Le Guin.

The organizing principles of the three utopian societies of Utopia, Mattapoisett and Anarres are related to the authors' basic views of human nature. On this point the authors seem to diverge: in *Utopia* humans are seen as generally untrustworthy, in *Woman on the Edge of Time* as essentially good, and in *The Dispossessed* as an indeterminable mixture. Consequently, the authors hold differing views on whether harmony is an obtainable goal, and also on what constitutes a good society.

In *Utopia* the narrator Raphael Hythlodæus¹ recognizes humans as “so very unpredictable” (More, *Utopia* 105).² A social system which “make[s] as little wrong as possible” (*U* 42) is necessary, since “things will never be perfect, until human beings are perfect – which I don’t expect them to be for quite a number of years!” (*U* 42). A comprehensive arrangement of laws, severe punishments, and an all-encompassing surveillance system help to control unruly humans. In *Utopia*, human happiness is viewed as a

¹ I have used Paul Turner’s translation of *Utopia*. Proper names in *Utopia* are in Greek. Yet since modern education normally does not include Greek, Turner felt obliged to translate them into English equivalents to make sure their significance was not overlooked. Raphael Hythlodæus therefore appears as Raphael Nonsenso, though I will refer to him simply as Raphael (*Utopia* xii).

² Subsequent references in parentheses to *Utopia* will be shortened to *U*.

result of prosperity and social stability. Raphael sees a balance between individual freedom and social order as impossible. In a good society individual differences must be surrendered for the sake of stability. The Utopians are for the most part treated as equals, and conformity is a means to achieving a harmonious society.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time* Piercy's positive view on human nature comes to the fore. Connie, the protagonist, is a foreigner invited on a guided tour that includes both a description and a discussion of the different social, technological, political and economic improvements achieved by the utopian population. Connie, or Consuelo Ramos, is a 37-year-old Mexican-American living on welfare in New York. Contact with utopia is not her initiative. Rather, she is sought out by Luciente, a woman from the future. Together the two of them time-travel to Mattapoisett, a village in Massachusetts, in the year 2137. Common consensus and harmony are dominant features of Mattapoisett, and Connie says: "You have wonderful faith in other people!" (Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* 183).³ According to its inhabitants, Mattapoisett is a society on the verge of social and human perfection.

Autonomous humans live according to their motto: "Person must not do what person cannot do" (*WET* 101). A perfected social system strengthens the communal spirit and simultaneously prevents individuals from intruding on each other's privacy. When disruptive feelings like jealousy or disagreement cause tension among people, they are expected to control themselves and reach an agreement. Outward incentives are unnecessary for people to act morally. Harmony is the result of internalized social norms and self-regulation.

However, this self-regulation restricts individual freedom. Agreement in Mattapoisett may be caused by manipulation and a pressure to conform rather than a voluntary obligation, and those who disagree may not have the possibility to withdraw. Humans are both psychologically and physically modified to fit into an idealized image of society. Babies born

³ Subsequent references in parentheses to *Woman on the Edge of Time* will be shortened to *WET*.

from “brooders”⁴ and men able to breast-feed their children indicate how far Mattapoisett has gone to erase individual differences to ensure equality between the sexes. Still equality alone, does not guarantee a good life. The erasure of individual differences entails restricting individual freedom. The inhabitants of Mattapoisett claims that diversity exists within the borders of Mattapoisett. Yet the nature of the proclaimed diversity must be examined, and also the treatment of those who fall short of the norm.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin portrays human nature in flux, neither wholly good nor completely untrustworthy. Le Guin suggests that if human fulfilment is the aim, society has to accept instability. Bedap, the protagonist Shevek’s friend, recognizes “the will to dominance [as just] [...] as central in human beings as the impulse to mutual aid” (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 168).⁵ Anarres is far from an ideal society. Humans are not seen as born as fully developed moral agents; therefore social skills must be trained. There is no guarantee of success, and consequently neither human nature nor the system is impeccable. A restrictive system designed to control human behaviour, however, prevents people from taking full responsibility for their own actions. People need freedom to develop their true human potential. Individual choices preserve diversity, but are likely to disrupt social harmony.

The questions raised in *The Dispossessed* are different from those in *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Can a society with a high conflict level like Anarres still be experienced as a good society? Unlike *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* where privacy is strictly limited, *The Dispossessed* is concerned with where to draw the line between private and public life – which areas of life need public interference, and which areas are best left for individual decisions.

⁴ The brooder is where “embryos are growing almost ready to birth” (*WET* 102). The foetuses remain in big tanks until they are fully developed.

⁵ Subsequent references to *The Dispossessed* in parentheses will be shortened to *TD*.

It is useful to treat freedom and order in terms of a continuum ranging from anarchism to totalitarianism. Along this continuum the fictional societies of Utopia, Mattapoisett and Anarres can be compared and contrasted. I will pay special attention to ambiguities detectable in the authors' presentations and statements of their utopian alternatives, to bring out their differing views on individual freedom and social order. The utopian narratives claim to portray, if not an ideal, then at least a perfection-seeking society. Thus they attempt to cater for what individuals hold as important in their personal lives. This includes basic needs like food and housing, education, work, leisure time, the possibility of developing relationships to other people, the right to express their own opinions, and active participation in political decisions. At the same time these narratives also have to consider society as a whole. There is a need to secure the stability of society and prevent the oppression of individuals or groups within it. However, the narratives fall short of establishing equilibrium between individual freedom and collective stability.

Utopian narratives often attempt to portray egalitarian societies, but tend to curtail the individual freedom of their citizens. It can be argued that egalitarianism and individual freedom are related terms. The utopian egalitarian ideal tends to involve a society in which people, irrespective of race, class or sex enjoy equal political, economic and social privileges and opportunities. Freedom, on the other hand, is ambiguous. When More talks about freedom, for example, it does not apply equally to both sexes and all classes of society. Utopia with its patriarchal construction can not be defined as an egalitarian society. Therefore, it is only possible to talk about limited freedom in Utopia. By comparison, Mattapoisett has broken "all the old hierarchies" (*WET* 105), according to Luciente. Mattapoisett might therefore qualify as an egalitarian society. Still, the social arrangement does not in all areas secure the right to make individual choices that oppose established norms. There is no automatic correlation between egalitarianism and individual freedom; rather individual

freedom demands the possibility to live according to self-defined norms and values. On some occasions, individual choices may prove contrary to the good of society. The challenge is then to be able to live peacefully with conflicting desires and choices, rather than enforce a solution to all problems.

Both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* celebrate the idea of individual freedom, but the social order designed towards this ideal differs. Both societies are founded on some agreed-upon, basic principles. Yet the pressure of conformity controls individuals in Mattapoisett to the extent that even human nature is altered to serve social stability. There is also pressure to conform in the anarchic utopia of Anarres in *The Dispossessed*. Anarres lacks an official government, but the author questions whether a system restraining individual freedom will inevitably force its way. While Piercy sees her utopian citizens as capable of living moral lives in accordance with their utopian ideals, Le Guin suggests that human nature, though predisposed to tolerance and mutual aid, may evolve into domination and oppression. The authors' views of human nature as a limiting factor in regard to individual freedom needs to be considered in relation to all the three works treated here. The degree of freedom allowed ultimately reflects the authors' underlying degree of trust in human nature.

I intend to divide my thesis into four chapters. Each deals with the paradox of trying to reconcile individual freedom and social order. In chapter one I will introduce the theoretical framework which will enable me to discuss the position of the three works within the utopian genre, and provide a common viewpoint from which to discuss tensions between the individual and the collective. In chapter two I will trace historical developments in the responses to utopian narratives; these responses show a development of the utopian genre. Traditionally, responses to utopian narratives claimed that these narratives inevitably end up curbing individual freedom, but this has changed in later years. The traditional utopian form

and content have been altered to bypass the problem of totalitarianism, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* exemplify various alterations. At the same time the function, and by that I mean what the author hopes to achieve with her utopia, of utopian narratives may have changed. In chapter three I propose that *Woman on the Edge of Time* can be seen as a revised version of Thomas More's *Utopia*, a utopia with a clear bias toward social order at the expense of individual freedom. Utopia, in addition to maintaining a hierarchical structure, controls every aspect of life to the extent that it resembles a totalitarian regime. Piercy, however, attempts to depict a utopian society in which women and other stigmatised groups enjoy equal rights and possibilities. Piercy aims to describe a reasonable compromise between individual freedom and social obligations, yet her answer involves human alterations, and this entails a severe curtailment of the freedom of the individual. In chapter four I will look into how *The Dispossessed*, compared to *Woman on the Edge of Time*, approaches individual freedom and social order. Mattapoisett's principle of consensus and agreed-upon rules, assumed necessary to safeguard against oppression, create a growing suspicion that Piercy's optimistic outlook on human nature is a cover-up for a distrust in human goodness. Le Guin, contrary to Piercy, accepts human deficiencies. Her view is that human beings provided with an optimal social system and education will be able to create a better world. Le Guin therefore becomes the hopeful.

1- Theoretical approach

Utopia, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* are all utopias describing what the authors see as important features of a good society, yet they approach the inconsistency between individual freedom and social order differently. Literary utopia is an umbrella term that contains distinct sub-types. The treatment of individual freedom and social order in the utopian narrative is a characteristic feature which helps locate the utopia in question within the different sub-types. In this chapter I will provide various views of what a utopia is, and also identify sub-types that are important in relation to my chosen works: traditional utopia, arcadia, feminist utopia and critical utopia. Finally I will look into what these sub-types have in common and how they differ.

Thomas More was the inventor of the term utopia, and usually he is also given credit for the characteristic form of traditional utopias. Agreement among scholars does not seem to go much further. The term utopia, like most things in *Utopia*, is ambiguous. Derived from Greek it may mean both “no place” and “good place” (Ferns, “Dreams” 453), but Raphael’s description of Utopia makes it impossible to determine the goodness or the seriousness of the proposals. The time span between *Utopia* on the one hand, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* on the other, is huge. Divergence in form and content is therefore expected within a genre where each work apparently is a response to contemporary society. Nonetheless, since *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* share important characteristics with *Utopia*, they both seem to fit into the utopian tradition.

Utopia’s form and content is the model of the utopia “proper” or the traditional utopia, yet a social system causing oppression and lack of freedom in Utopia, has caused revisions in the traditional utopia. Ruth Levitas claims that even if other Renaissance utopias exist, “[u]topia ‘proper’ begins with Thomas More” (*The Concept* 158). Tom Moylan agrees, and

states that “the specific western tradition of the literary utopia is generally agreed to have originated with [...] *Utopia*” (2). Barbara Goodwin gives a more elaborate account of the “the traditional utopian form” (qtd. in Ferns, *Narrating* 13). It describes a journey to a remote place or the future, where the protagonist / visitor is presented with “a perfect society which is viewed as an integrated totality” (13). J. C. Davis sees “totality, order [and] perfection [...] [as] cardinal characteristics of the utopian form” (38). The traditional utopian form resembles a travel narrative where the protagonist discovers a society which has been able to solve important contemporary social problems. Utopia is therefore by the protagonist seen as superior to her own reality.

Traditional utopias give a detailed description of everyday activities and are concerned to show “legal, institutional, bureaucratic and educational means of producing a harmonious society” (Davis 371). Usually the visitor converts to the utopian way of life, and gives a favourable account of utopian improvements in comparison with her current society. Some of More’s organizing principles, as for example communal ownership and life-long education, are frequently adopted in other utopias. Yet harmony and perfection requires “discipline of a totalitarian kind” (Davis 39) which weakens individual freedom and gives social order high importance. This is *Utopia*’s and traditional utopias’ problem. Still, a discussion of what is “a good life”, and how it is achieved, continues to be at the heart of each utopian narrative.

Utopianism, defined by Ruth Levitas as “expressions of desire” (*The Concept* 190), does not have to be in the form of a literary work, or a desire for a society intended to balance individual freedom and social order. Even though *Utopia* set off a literary genre, Levitas claims that utopianism and utopias are expressed in many forms. Utopian desire encompasses all expressions of desire: “a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the ‘collective problem’ solved” (*The Concept*

191). Davis also states that utopias “are sometimes given the form of literary fiction but not always” (38). However, authors of literary utopias are concerned with the gap between desire and satisfaction – the collective problem, and attempt to correct what they see as contemporary flaws. Desires, as Levitas points out, are concrete and individual, not always realistic, and certainly not universal and constant over time (*The Concept* 181-83). Literary utopias will therefore contain huge individual differences.

J.C. Davis defines utopia as emphasising order at the expense of freedom, and uses *Utopia*’s form to establish a definition of utopia. Utopia is a “holding operation, a set of strategies to maintain social order and perfection in the face of the deficiencies, not to say hostility, of nature and the wilfulness of man” (Davis 37). The collective problem, the conflict between unlimited individual desire and limited resources, cannot be solved completely. Utopia’s solution is a system able to restrain and control human beings in order to preserve social stability.

Yet, according to Davis, utopia is only one out of five forms of ideal societies, and not all of them are equally restrictive of individual freedom. Based on how they solve the collective problem Davis identifies four other forms of ideal societies in addition to utopia: the “Land of Cockayne”, “the millennial”, “the perfect moral commonwealth” and “arcadia”. The Land of Cockayne and the millennial are outside the reach of human influence. In the Land of Cockayne the collective problem is solved as a result of natural abundance rather than human restraint, and the millennial, even though human effort may be helpful, depends on some kind of external force such as an omnipotent deity to solve the collective problem. The perfect moral commonwealth and arcadia, however, depend on human agency to come about. In the perfect moral commonwealth people are loyal to social institutions and arrangements, and restrict personal needs for the communal good. In arcadia, a generous nature and moderate human desires result in harmony between humans and nature, as well as

social harmony between human beings. Arcadia “simplifies human desires and at the same time throws great stress on their satisfaction” (Davis 24). In arcadia human nature is seen as essentially good. Humans are able to see beyond private selfish interests, and will modify their behaviour and work towards communal goals. Arcadia, emphasizes Davis, “rejects all institutions whatsoever and so highlights the institutional preoccupations of the utopian” (24). Arcadia therefore becomes a radical alternative to utopia.

In arcadia human moderation is believed capable of balancing private and communal needs, but human diversity is likely to require either utopian structures or extensive alterations of human nature. While utopia relies on control of human behaviour to create a harmonious society, arcadia requires self-restraint. Davis describes arcadia’s demands as an “I-Death” (383). A deliberate policy involving social regulations, institutions, and various ways of disciplining humans may be necessary to maintain social harmony. Consequently, conformity and oppression of difference is a likely result.

Davis’ definition of utopia seems too narrow to include works commonly recognized as utopias. However, in relation to individual freedom and social order the distinction between utopia and arcadia is important. While utopia signals distrust in human nature, arcadia offers an optimistic attitude; human beings are moral agents able to create a harmonious society free from oppression. However, arcadia avoids the problem of conformity by denying its existence. Diversity within a society marked by agreement is a contradiction. Individuals may not be exposed to external control, still, some form of control is likely. In relation to *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* the distinction between utopia and arcadia is particularly relevant, and I will return to this in my analysis of the works.

Parallel to the classical utopian tradition emphasising social control, a separate feminist utopian tradition where external control is replaced by consensus can be identified. However, individual freedom is not achieved by common consensus. The term “feminist

utopia” identifies utopian narratives which have characteristics in common with Davis’ arcadia, but with a focus on “female” values, such as those Rae Rosenthal identifies as “egalitarianism, cooperation, connection, tolerance, generosity, and most important, harmony” (75). In feminist utopias an “emphasis on feminine values and issues, commitment to communalism, and an ability to overcome male intruders through either expulsion or conversion” (74) are distinguishing features. Ann J. Lane presents a list similar to Rosenthal’s of typical “female” characteristics: “class equality; some kind of communal child-rearing; absence of male violence; elimination of sex-linked work; the mother-child relationship and the idealized home as models for social institution; and the use of persuasion and consensus to maintain social order” (xxiv). By idealizing certain “female” values and converting or excluding male intruders, feminist utopias simultaneously narrow the scope of what is seen as acceptable within the utopian community. This is a drive towards conformity rather than diversity. Feminist utopias insist on social harmony. However, in contrast to traditional utopias, harmony is not accomplished by excessive control, but by inducement and agreement about communal goals. Feminist utopias come close to arcadia, and contain the same contradictions; harmony requires a transformation of human nature or entails a pressure to conformity which is not consistent with individual freedom and diversity.

While arcadia and feminist utopias have diminished traditional utopias’ problem of external control by altering human nature, the problem of conformity remains. Harmony due to self-regulation does not provide diversity. A further transformation of utopian narratives is needed to describe a “good society” able to cater to individual freedom.

Tom Moylan defines “critical utopias” as utopias which both include a critique of the utopian tradition of emphasizing social order over individual freedom, as well as descriptions of emancipating utopian societies. In Moylan’s view the critical utopias of the 1970s “not only revive the generic form but also, more or less aware of the totalizing limitations of the

form [...] destroy and change that form in such a way that, self-critical and wiser for the wear, it can give new life to the utopian impulse without falling into compromised abuse” (31).

Traditional elements like the alternative society and the visitor remain, but while traditional utopias mainly focus on detailed descriptions of the utopian society, the critical utopia also includes a detailed description of the society it reflects. Utopia is no longer complete and ideal, but rather a realistic alternative able to cope with significant problems in contemporary society. Utopia no longer co-exists in a distant, secret part of the world, but is set in the future, where “some hope for a better life for all humanity still lingers” (35-6). The protagonist or visitor is not an observer asking the right questions, but, according to Moylan, “a human subject in action” (45). Alternative social arrangements are still important. Unlike traditional utopias, however, which foreground social organization, critical utopias focus on characters and plot. Critical utopias do not appear as authoritarian societies. The reversals and innate flaws counteract the static nature and the completeness of traditional utopias, and enable critical utopias to “reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as dream” (10).

Nevertheless, the main difference is critical utopias’ function. Critical utopias are catalysts able to create “active human resistance” (49) by affecting people’s consciousness. Moylan’s idea of critical utopias is relevant to the discussion of *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed*, and is therefore included here.

The terms feminist utopia and critical utopia seem to overlap, yet Moylan claims that by abolishing all social hierarchies, critical utopias do not only promote freedom for women as a group, but individual freedom. Ann J. Lane agrees with Moylan that the form of the feminist utopias of the 1970s is altered to the extent that “the utopian novel as a literary form seems to be going through a rebirth” (xxiv). By mixing utopianism and science fiction, and locating their utopian worlds in the realm of fantasy, they are not quite “comparable to the classic utopian form” (xxiv). Still, feminist utopias of the 1970s express ideas similar to the

ones found in traditional feminist utopias.⁶ Moylan argues that by abolishing all forms of “hierarchy and domination” (12) critical utopias mark a shift in the utopian tradition. The emancipative powers of critical utopias are not solely directed towards women or other oppressed groups, but “stress the commitment and courage of individuals [...] [and] identify the importance of personal engagement within collective effort” (147).

Still, communal commitments need some boundaries to avoid curtailing individual freedom. I agree with Moylan that critical utopias can avoid totalitarian tendencies inherent in traditional utopias. However, interpreting critical utopias as collective resistance that simultaneously promotes individual freedom seems to be a contradiction. Moylan sees the critical utopia as “a meditation on action rather than on system” (49). The protagonist is no longer a passive observer, but a “human subject [...] able to carry on anti-hegemonic tasks aimed at bringing down the prevailing system” (49). Thus, the protagonist symbolizes “the civil rights, anti-war, women’s and other movements in the late 1960s that valorized militant human action, individually chosen but in concert with a renewed community of activists” (49-50). Moylan’s reasoning ignores the fact that individual acts contributing to a communal goal may not come through free choices, but as a result of persuasion and forced consensus. By emphasizing the function of utopia rather than its content, the collective rather than individual needs, Moylan may overlook oppressive tendencies present in critical utopias, and this point is relevant in connection to *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

Dystopian warnings have acquired far more attention than eutopias⁷ in the 20th century. Harmony and total agreement can only be achieved by curbing individual freedom. Rather than promoting a good life free from oppression, utopia, with its rules and regulations,

⁶ Ann J. Lane’s characteristics of traditional feminist utopias are referred to on page 14.

⁷ Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition of eutopia makes it equivalent to a “good” society: “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived” (Sargent 9).

will inevitably end up describing a totalitarian system. Isaiah Berlin sums up utopia's problem:

It is clear that the notion of a harmonious solution of the problems of mankind, even in principle, and therefore of the very concept of Utopia,⁸ is incompatible with the interpretation of the human world as a battle of perpetually new and ceaselessly conflicting wills, individual and collective. (Berlin 44)

Lyman Tower Sargent's statement that "utopianism is essential but dangerous" (22) acknowledges utopia's problem, but emphasises an equally important trend in the current debate about the value of utopianism: "In one, utopia is seen as leading inevitably to force, violence, and totalitarianism. In the other, utopia is seen as an essential ingredient of freedom, civilization, and even of being human" (26). Strong opposing views make it difficult to reconcile the different opinions. Opponents of utopianism claim that utopia as a good place is unattainable since people are unable to make right choices. Authors of utopian literature refuse to accept reality, and fall back on oppressive methods to achieve their utopian goal. However, the opponents' problem is that by rejecting utopia they also reject the possibility of reforms. Proponents claim that without the optimistic possibilities utopia represents, apathy may be a consequence. Utopia preserves the belief that humans can improve social conditions; belief creates hope, hope generates effort, and "[e]ffort is more likely to produce positive results than no effort" (27).

Social changes therefore depend on the desire for utopia. Despite inherent contradictions, Sargent claims utopias jointly form "the basic pattern of attitudes to social change" (28): hope is replaced by failure and a feeling of hopelessness, which again causes rejection of hope, followed by a renewal of hope. As expressions of desire for something better, *Utopia*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* may create dismissal or

⁸ Berlin is talking about utopias in general, not about More's *Utopia*.

hope in the reader. Any reaction is probably better than apathy, yet it is important to recognize that utopias might emphasize social order at the expense of individual freedom. To reveal these tendencies, an examination of utopias' content is necessary.

2 - *Utopia*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed*: The Utopian Tradition.

Utopia recognized as a totalitarian state has nourished the claim that utopian narratives cannot escape describing oppressive systems. *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* are both attempts to get around this snare. The utopian societies of Mattapoisett and Anarres are egalitarian societies with a focus on female issues. While I consider *Woman on the Edge of Time*'s emphasis on social harmony and equality to cause a repressive system similar to the one found in *Utopia*, *The Dispossessed* is a fruitful bid. Rather than a utopian society expressing agreed-upon rules, *The Dispossessed*'s protagonist Shevek evaluates the utopian arrangements from his personal perspective. In addition to short summaries of the works, this chapter includes critics' assessments of the authors' successfulness in describing societies able to preserve diversity and individual freedom.

The utopian societies in *Utopia*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *The Dispossessed* contain social arrangements believed capable of balancing individual freedom and social order, yet *Utopia* appears to be like a totalitarian regime. As liberating alternatives *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* see various alterations as necessary to shun repressive propensities intrinsic in traditional utopian narratives.

Thomas More began writing *Utopia* when he was on a state delegation to Flanders in 1515. While book one contains an imagined conversation in Peter Gilles' home in Antwerp between Gilles, Thomas More himself, and Raphael, book two is Raphael's tale of Utopia. There is a close connection between the two books. The discussion among the men covers serious political and social problems of contemporary England, which Utopia has purportedly been able to solve. Examples are the replacing of private ownership with communal ownership, allowing people meaningful work, securing societal development by encouraging

lifelong education, and decentralizing power to a morally devoted group of men. People's freedom, however, is strictly limited. They are not free to choose their own work, where they want to live, or how to spend their spare time. In religious matters, they have to believe in an all-powerful force and eternal life. Every aspect of people's lives is controlled, and surveillance is never relaxed. There is no privacy, since they believe that dead ancestors watch over them when they are on their own. To avoid violations of any sort, threats of retaliation are used as a deterrent, and even minor offences qualify for severe punishment.

Utopia's elaborate system of controlling individual freedom has led many scholars to conclude that *Utopia* is totalitarian. J. C. Davis sees *Utopia* as "founded on the constant and total disciplining of men" (61). "[C]ontinuous coercion, education and scrutiny" (60) in *Utopia* have forced them to give up "the freedoms of participating citizens" (60). All decisions made in *Utopia* favour the community. In John Guy's biography *Thomas More*, Guy describes More's attitudes as "always authoritarian" (222). Neither More's philosophy nor *Utopia* makes room for "freedom for the rights of individual conscience" (223). The institutions of *Utopia* are "certainly 'radical', but there is nothing liberal about them. No society is more strictly regulated or predicated" (221). Hanan Yoran sees the "quasi-totalitarian nature of Utopian society" (8) as a consequence of the utopian social order: it "produces subjects devoid of individuality, reflective capacity and inwardness" (9). R. W. Chambers states that "the ideal of *Utopia* is discipline, not liberty" (145) and he asks: "Has any State, at any time, carried terrorism quite so far?" (145). In *Utopia* private and public life is impossible to tell apart. While social stability is preserved, individual freedom is absent.

Woman on the Edge of Time and *The Dispossessed* attempt to reconcile communal obligations and individual freedom to avoid the trap of totalitarianism. One improvement on More's *Utopia* is an alteration of his pessimistic view of human nature where control of individual behaviour is seen as necessary to preserve social harmony. In *Woman on the Edge*

of Time people are viewed as moral agents capable of making the right decisions. In *The Dispossessed*, social conscience is not an innate quality, but rather a skill that can be trained. Individual freedom, however, is inviolable. External control is therefore not a valid option, although it appears that this is not unambiguous in *The Dispossessed*. In *Utopia* women enjoy greater freedom than in contemporary England, yet they are more restricted than men. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed*, gender does not seem to make a difference, and human domination over nature has been replaced by a relationship of mutual dependency. The authors' new knowledge recognizes that the world's resources are finite, thus unlimited progress and production is impossible.

Still, the most serious allegations towards *Utopia* – that Utopia resembles a totalitarian regime – require more fundamental changes in utopian narratives. *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed* attempt some of these changes. In *Utopia* the drive toward harmony and agreement presumes that every conflict has a correct answer and that humans find happiness in the same way. This is not the case in *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Dispossessed*. By including conflicts and disagreement in their utopian societies, Piercy and Le Guin recognize that equality and individual needs must be equally catered for. While both utopias respond to inherent limitations in the traditional utopian form and content, they do not approach the problem in the same way, and do not seem equally successful. The question is: To what extent do the revisions adhere to the goal of securing individual freedom?

Although *Woman on the Edge of Time* attempts to overcome *Utopia*'s shortcomings, significant problems in regard to individual freedom are apparent. Human goodness and contentment underpin the utopian society in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, yet its form bears a striking resemblance to *Utopia*. In Mattapoisett most citizens, in spite of their outward differences, identify with the common goal of cleaning up and restoring nature after an ecological disaster in the past. Production is not abundant, but sufficient. Strict regulation

prevents shortage, and necessities are given higher priority than luxury items. As in Utopia, however, human relationships and individual behaviour are regulated. Not by an authoritarian ruler as in Utopia, but according to democratically defined norms. The consequences, though, are similar. In Mattapoisett, as in Utopia, people have virtually no privacy, and their individual freedom is therefore limited.

Unlike Utopia, however, the people of Mattapoisett are seemingly individuals in charge of their own lives, free to choose their own careers and families. Occasionally they disagree, but differences are surmountable through negotiations. *Woman on the Edge of Time* views human nature differently from *Utopia*. In Mattapoisett contented and unselfish individuals are offered equal opportunities in a society free from oppression. Yet mutual dependency is in Mattapoisett identified as a central feature of any society, and makes communal goals worth struggling for. External control is unnecessary. When people are provided with right conditions they are expected to make right choices.

As regards individual freedom, *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* exemplify the difference between traditional utopias and many feminist utopias. More does not find it necessary to abolish patriarchy to create a just society; rather, it is private property and greed that are seen as the main disrupters of social stability. Feminist utopias, though, as an expansion of traditional utopias, emphasize gender equality. In Mattapoisett a good life involves more than even distribution of goods. To correct More's mistake, Mattapoisett depicts a society in which women and other stigmatised groups enjoy equal rights and possibilities.

Woman on the Edge of Time sees gender equality as necessary in order for women to gain individual freedom. Piercy, a feminist activist during the 1970s, is particularly influenced by Shulamith Firestone. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone articulates that the end goal of a feminist revolution is

not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. [...] The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by [...] artificial reproduction [...] The tyranny of the biological family would be broken. (11-12, emphases in original)

Firestone continues: “we haven’t even a literary image of this future society; there is not even a *utopian* feminist literature in existence” (256, emphasis in original). Piercy undertakes the challenge. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is, in Piercy’s own words, the “result of a full feminist revolution” (*Parti-Colored* 215). Piercy, like Firestone, proclaims that “unless the sexual contradictions are dealt with and unless women achieve full equality, we cannot have a good society” (33). Elaine Hoffman Baruch claims that by providing good role-models for women and opposing the idea of malleable humans directed entirely by selfish interests *Woman on the Edge of Time* became “a kind of bible for many feminists” (135). Providing women with the same social, economic and political possibilities as men secures an egalitarian society. But, making men and women more identical implies erasure of difference. The result is conformity rather than individual freedom.

Still, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is by many critics seen as a move away from totalitarian currents of traditional utopias towards an egalitarian society marked by individual freedom. Carmen Cramer sees *Woman on the Edge of Time* as “a return to the ideal that individuals can form and control a society, rather than the other way around” (230). Elaine Hoffman Baruch views Mattapoissett as a society that “fuses utopia and its pursuit of civilization with arcadia, the land of personal pleasure” (44). Thus, “feminists, male as well as female, might want to live” (44) in it. Claire P. Curtis sees disagreement within Mattapoissett as a sign that Piercy is “highly aware of the dangers of utopia” (148). By including conflicts Piercy encourages diversity rather than oppresses difference. The result is a society very

different from the totalitarian regimes in the past. Mattapoisett is “messy, imperfect, and difficult [a]nd yet, [...] also strongly compelling” (161). Ruth Levitas agrees. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, she thinks, is among those utopias which are not “totalitarian [...] [but] quite the reverse” (“For Utopia” 32). Mattapoisett is not totalitarian⁹ in the traditional sense of the word. Unlike Utopia where the “intelligentsia”¹⁰ (U 58) or the privileged ruling class, dominate and control the population, Mattapoisett is a democracy. Still, common consensus typical of feminist utopias can be experienced as oppressive. Equality as the overall goal encourages conformity and restricts individual freedom.

Even though many scholars adhere to the view that *Woman on the Edge of Time* is able to balance individual freedom and social order, there are some dissenting voices. Rachel Blau DuPlessis affirms that “Piercy has answered the famous Cold War dystopias like *1984* and *Brave New World* which lament that there is no possibility of imagining an anti-totalitarian society” (4). Yet in *Woman on the Edge of Time* DuPlessis detects flaws ascribable to the utopian form of the novel. The people of Mattapoisett are not authentic characters, she thinks, but “flat [...] because they represent compendia of typical traits” (2). Connie, a poor Mexican-American abused by most men and institutions she becomes acquainted with, and finally assigned to a mental hospital even though she is portrayed as sane, is also “somewhat overloaded with typicality” (3). Kim Trainor states that in Mattapoisett private emotions threatening to disturb the “communal balance” (33) are no longer private. To preserve harmony Mattapoisett meddles with issues that ought to be private, and communal duties and participation are occasionally “in danger of lapsing into coercion” (36).

In my view *Woman on the Edge of Time* does not alter typical characteristics of traditional utopias sufficiently to appear as completely different. As in Utopia, the people of

⁹ “A totalitarian political system is one in which there is only one political party, and this party controls everything and does not allow any opposition parties” (*Collins Cobuild* 1546).

¹⁰ The intelligentsia in *Utopia* is “the class from which the diplomats, priests, Bencheaters, and , of course, mayors are recruited” (U 58).

Mattapoisett are not believable characters but perform the task of presenting the utopian system. Raphael sees Utopia as outstanding compared to contemporary England, yet Connie's conversion leads to self-destruction and murder. Piercy's commitment to harmony is also problematic. Individuals have the power to influence decisions through negotiations. If they totally disagree and fail to convince the community in their favour, retreating to a different community or living as a hermit is possible. However, a life in Mattapoisett involves "family duties, political duties [and] social duties" (*WET* 267). If one chooses to live within the borders of Mattapoisett, one simultaneously agrees to take up on the duties and way of life decided upon by the community as a whole. It is not a life where you are free to agree to some terms and reject others, but a wholesale commitment. Even though one is granted more privacy than in Utopia, and everybody has their "own space" (*WET* 72), the "one-big-happy-family" image of Utopia is very much present. Diversity is limited to harmless areas where it no longer poses a threat to social stability. In important matters all agree, and individual freedom is strictly limited. Communal obligations and forced consensus make Mattapoisett's unity similar to the oppression of difference apparent in Utopia.

The Dispossessed challenges more directly the conflict between individual desires and social demands than *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and is as such a more successful development of the utopian genre. On utopian Anarres in *The Dispossessed* the harmony of traditional utopias and feminist utopias is absent. Rather, the inconsistency between the ideal of individual freedom and a reality of forced consensus, corruption and misuse of power is apparent. Shevek, the protagonist, constantly finds himself in situations where both options inflict moral dilemmas; should he go against established norms and gratify his own needs at the expense of communal needs, or should he adopt conventional ideas and suppress private desires? For the sake of convenience the latter alternative seems to him the

most attractive. Still, there is hardly an either – or answer. Le Guin suggests that humans need experience of disagreement and negotiation to be autonomous human beings.

The Dispossessed is set on two different planets: utopian Anarres and dystopian Urras, yet the good qualities are not predominantly located at the utopian end. Urras is rich and fertile, and even though rigid hierarchies remain, people have a general feeling of freedom. On Anarres a rough climate causes natural scarcity and hardship. Anarres' anarchist-communist ideology emphasises equality and individual freedom. The result is a society without private property, government, law or punishment, and where all relationships are purely a private commitment. Still, cooperation is necessary for survival, and a bureaucracy has developed to maintain a just distribution of goods and workforce. A social system arises. The fact that corruption, dishonesty, abuse of privileges and misuse of power threaten to undermine the social system, though, is overlooked by the majority, and social conscience has become a powerful force. Shevek observes that Anarres no longer supports the freedom of its citizens.

On Urras people feel free, but social hierarchies restrict individual freedom. Women are believed incapable of “abstract thought” (*TD* 73). Thus universities and workplaces are forbidden territory. On Urras the different governments are involved in a power struggle seeking to subdue one another while simultaneously aiming to control and exploit their own citizens. Shevek, guest lecturer in physics at the University of A-Io, also becomes a potential victim. The state of A-Io on Urras wants the military and economic advantages his theory of instant interplanetary communication will provide them with. When Shevek takes part in a general strike, the power surge and unscrupulous attitudes of the A-Io government are apparent. Unarmed protesters are brutally shot down by the army.

The Dispossessed is an open-ended utopia. While Naomi Jacobs perceives Shevek's return to Anarres as “an unambiguously progressive one” (41) that does not alter anything, I

am of a different opinion. Shevek's departure for Urras caused an uproar, and he is anxious that his return to Anarres will do the same. He is, however, willing to risk his own security. Le Guin seems to insist that freedom cannot exist in a vacuum; rather norms must be constantly questioned and altered.

The Dispossessed requires a broad definition of utopia, and exemplifies a thorough conversion within the utopian genre. Susan Storing Benfield calls *The Dispossessed* "a brilliant science fiction novel [...] in the tradition of utopian and dystopian fiction" (128). Still, she remarks, "Anarres has flaws too serious for it to be considered a utopia" (134), and is therefore better described as "anti-utopian" (134). As Benfield points out, *The Dispossessed*'s deviant form and content do not fit into any of Davis' forms of ideal societies. Le Guin avoids emphasizing typical "female" values, and, contrary to feminist utopias, she defines persuasion and consensus as restrictive of individual freedom. It is therefore difficult to define *The Dispossessed* as a feminist utopia. Moylan includes it as a critical utopia, yet it remains a "flawed, critical utopia" (120). *The Dispossessed* lacks the persuasiveness of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and there is no "social revolution caused by the utopian impulse" (104). In Le Guin's view, *The Dispossessed* is primarily intended as a novel. The fact that it occasionally has been perceived as a treatise is "its own damn fault [...] announcing itself as a utopia, even if an ambiguous one" ("A Response" 306).¹¹

Claims that Le Guin does not offer her utopian citizens more sexual freedom than contemporary society are unwarranted. Moylan sees Le Guin's choice of protagonist, a heterosexual male favouring a monogamous partnership and the nuclear family, as creating "a conflict between the sexual and gender emancipation asserted and the actual words, images, and narrative produced" (101). Rather than undermining the existing oppressive system, *The*

¹¹ *The Dispossessed* was first published as "*The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*" (Burns 139). This has been altered, and the version I am using carries the title *The Dispossessed: A Novel*.

Dispossessed is a confirmation. Delany describes Bedap as “a rather pitiable ‘token homosexual’” (qtd. in Lensing 90). Sexual emancipation may be the norm on Anarres, but is not sufficiently emphasised so as to be convincing, according to Delany. In Sarah Lefanu’s view Le Guin fails to provide good role-models for women: “besides the sultry temptress Veal, Le Guin gives us a mother figure who is cold, hard, rejecting and narrow-minded” (132-33) and “[p]oor old Takver, the token strong woman, keeps the home fires burning while Shevek is off changing the future of mankind” (141). Rather than being just, the criticism, in my view, reveals a pressure to conformity directed towards female authors of utopian narratives. Egalitarian ideals and feminist issues are less emphasized than in utopias like *Women on the Edge of Time*, but the ideas are still there. One just has to dig a bit deeper. Still, Le Guin’s main concern in *The Dispossessed* is various forms of oppression.

By suggesting that there is no automatic correlation between equality and individual freedom, *The Dispossessed* broadens the scope of feminist utopias. Le Guin maintains that despite equality, the contradictions between individual freedom and social control will not only prevail but cause conformity and oppression. From a feminist perspective the disappointment about *The Dispossessed* is perhaps understandable. Written in a period “of the greatest optimism and inventiveness in the women’s movement” (Magarey 326), every contribution supporting feminist ideas of equality between the sexes was welcomed. Magarey points out that the number of feminist utopias published in the 1970s increased radically. Along with demonstrations, meetings and singing, the feminist utopia was an important tool of the Women’s Liberation Movement (326). A female author, who allows a man to steal the show while the women are left in the background, and who suggests that equality does not automatically qualify for freedom, seemed like betrayal to many feminists.

A new feminism emphasising women as individuals with different needs and aspirations has surfaced in recent years. Accordingly, feminist issues in *The Dispossessed* are

viewed more sympathetically. Lucy Sargisson argues that feminism has changed, and contains “less self-certainty and dogma [...] and respect for diverse opinions” (96) than the feminism of the 1970s. This is Mario Klarer’s point when he declares *The Dispossessed* “a precursor of the new feminism” (119). Egalitarianism on Anarres assigns women the same opportunities as men, yet unlike most female authors Le Guin does not “draw very distinct lines between good and bad, male and female” (117). Barbara Drake agrees. *The Dispossessed* seems “totally feminist in its ideology [...] [with a] universal rather than a strictly female application” (126). Unlike Piercy who sees oppression as a result of an uneven power balance between different social groups, Le Guin points at factors that restrict individual freedom. In my view, individual oppression in *The Dispossessed* relates to other individuals or the system, rather than social groups. Consequently, individual freedom and diversity receives primary attention.

Still, Le Guin has a political message in *The Dispossessed*. Her defence of individual freedom can be seen as an attack on conformity within the radical feminist movement. Unlike Piercy, Le Guin avoids drastic measures – she does not tamper with human biology or censor human emotions. Also, the biological family as one possible alternative, the ability to nurture as an individual capacity equally present in both sexes, homosexuality as an innate feature, and home births rather than hospital deliveries, are all contributions to the feminist debate. The difference from *Woman on the Edge of Time* is that they are personal choices rather than the only available options.

Woman on the Edge of Time contains ambiguities, but the overall message is straightforward. Unlike More, Piercy does not contradict herself or make humorous comments in the text. Rather, when she talks about *Woman on the Edge of Time*, she claims it is “very intentionally not a utopia because it is not strikingly new” (*Parti-Colored* 100). All the amendments are within reach, and Mattapoisett’s social system is based on the ideas of the women’s movement. Mattapoisett is an idea. Still, it is closer to reality than most utopias. The

purpose is not merely to criticize current society, but to encourage the reader to imagine political changes. For those who disagree, this is not entirely comforting. Keith Booker warns that the “line between utopia and dystopia can be a fine one” (341). Many of the practices in Mattapoisett, as in Utopia, are rather extreme, and there is no hint suggesting that Mattapoisett will change its course. As Moylan suggests, *Woman on the Edge of Time*’s insistence on social change gives it a defined purpose: “[u]topia could grow out of the victory of the allied oppositional forces, with the utopian impulse itself being a major motivating force” (138). Piercy uses *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a political weapon in the struggle for a feminist revolution.

Utopia’s ambiguities make different interpretations possible. *Utopia* as a blueprint for action may be superseded by an understanding of utopia as a social critique of contemporary society. Chambers interprets *Utopia* as “a protest” (142) against corruption and immoral actions caused by private ownership. When it was published, *Utopia* offered a better option for most people than current society. Therefore, *Utopia* as desire for something better and as social critique of existing society, seems like a plausible explanation. However, while *Utopia*’s extreme solutions highlight the problem, they do not necessarily represent More’s answer. Quentin Skinner claims that *Utopia* is “the most radical critique of humanism written by a humanist” (qtd. in Guy 99). *Utopia* shows what it takes to cope with the social ills described in book one. If humans are directed by reason alone, as the humanists claim, *Utopia* follows as a logical consequence. Whether *Utopia*’s relevance is directed towards this world or the main emphasis is on the utopian world, remains an open question.

The Dispossessed lacks the persuasive power and immediacy of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and its purpose may rather be in line with *Utopia*’s ambiguous stance. Le Guin does not idealize utopia or its citizens, yet Anarres provides people with an individual freedom Urras is unable to match. *The Dispossessed* as a critique of contemporary society which fails

to put an end to systemic oppression is plausible. Nevertheless, in *The Dispossessed*, individual characters speak on their own behalf rather than as representatives of the utopian community. Dialogues and thoughts present contradictory viewpoints. The protest is therefore indirect rather than obvious, shaped as meditation rather than answers. Moylan is right when he complains that Anarres is not a “utopian society subverting the world” (104). Still, he seems to contradict himself. In his theory of critical utopias, he claims that utopia “can offer no systematic solution of its own. It can only offer itself as an activity which opens human imagination beyond the present limits” (40). Le Guin’s main intention is not to stimulate action, but to stimulate thought which makes the reader consider her own opinions and priorities regarding a good society. Still, Le Guin does not aim completely at approval. Occasionally it is necessary to stir things up to get the wished-for effect. To a feminist Shevek is a provocation. However, if utopia takes diversity seriously, he may represent the kind of diversity that must be tolerated. In the same way that *Utopia* may be viewed as a critique of humanism, *The Dispossessed* may be seen as a critique of feminist assumptions of society. A reading of *The Dispossessed* as an assessment of feminist ideas of the 1970s may be justified.

Fear that utopia in its traditional form will inevitably lead to totalitarianism is justified, yet the basic assumption is that utopia always describes a harmonious society. This, however, is not the case with *The Dispossessed*. While *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* arguably have a problem with human conformity in their narratives, *The Dispossessed* is promising. Realistic characters and a complete transformation of the utopian form may be necessary to preserve diversity and avoid the pitfall of totalitarianism. Within the utopian genre *The Dispossessed* represents a new type of freedom. The systems of *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* attempt to provide freedom from various forms of oppression, but end up restraining individual freedom. *The Dispossessed* rejects the idea that a system is possible. By

getting rid of all the “do’s and don’ts” (*TD* 219) Anarres aims to help people “see good and evil and choose between them” (*TD* 219).

3 - *Woman on the Edge of Time*: Thomas More's *Utopia* Revised.

Woman on the Edge of Time's form corresponds closely to *Utopia*, yet its focus on gender equality turns it into a revision. While *Utopia* is a totalitarian state where men dominate, Mattapoisett cherishes equality, individual freedom and belonging. However, communal duties and consensus in Mattapoisett limit people's freedom. In this chapter I will show how Mattapoisett, rather than remaining an arcadian society where people live peacefully together, moves towards utopian organization. Piercy's assent to the use of violence marks a break with the feminist utopian tradition, and I consider Piercy's revision of *Utopia* a failure.

The utopian societies of *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* are harmonious, yet the ideal of harmony often leads to contradictions. It becomes difficult to reconcile individual freedom and social order and at the same time preserve diversity. *Woman on the Edge of Time* recognizes the link between *Utopia* and totalitarianism, and tries to present a utopian society that amends More's flaws. However, both in *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* the end is an oppressive system. Personal decisions and desires are given up for the sake of order and stability, thus severely curtailing individual freedom.

Connie, the protagonist in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, explicitly disavows any links between the utopian society of Mattapoisett and totalitarianism. She remarks: "never in your life have you been helpless – under somebody's heel. You never lived where your enemies held power over you, power to run your life or wipe it out" (*WET* 263). So far in her life, Connie has had the experience of being controlled by others; her welfare has depended on authoritarian institutions, and men. She says: "All my life I been pushed around by my father, by my brother Luis, by schools, by bosses, by cops, by doctors and lawyers and caseworkers and pimps and landlords. By everybody who could push" (*WET* 98-9). Connie, a poor female Mexican immigrant, represents the oppressed "class/gender/racial alliance" (Moylan 125) of

critical utopias. Mattapoisett, with a social order designed towards the ideal of individual freedom, contrasts with her contemporary society and enables her to imagine a life in which her sex, culture and race do not restrict her individual freedom.

Utopia and Mattapoisett are harmonious societies, and both More and Piercy claim that harmony is achieved through happiness. Social harmony is a characteristic feature of both traditional utopias and feminist utopias. Still, harmony is achieved in different ways. According to Davis, problems do not disappear in traditional utopias. Rather, utopia shows how problems are controlled or eliminated. Traditional utopia's goal is not "happiness, that private mystery, but order, that social necessity" (38). In traditional utopias, as in Utopia, social harmony is enforced rather than a consequence of human happiness. Feminist utopias, on the other hand, rely on consensus. Carol Pearson identifies conventional upbringing of women as central to how women visualize a good society: "socialization to serve and to sacrifice one's own needs for those of others makes it possible for women to envision a society in which people cooperate, instead of compete, and nurture instead of dominate one another" (qtd. in Rosenthal 75). In Mattapoisett social harmony caused by self-restraint, cooperation and consensus provide people with a sense of belonging, and freedom to run their own lives translates into true happiness.

In Mattapoisett the contradiction between individual freedom and social order has apparently been solved. Luciente's remark suggests that Mattapoisett has moved beyond the point where external control is crucial: "we think control interferes with pleasure and with communing – and we care about both" (*WET* 117). Social organization in Mattapoisett suggests that *Women on the Edge of Time* is a feminist utopia. So-called female values dominate human interaction in Mattapoisett. Yet at the same time the link between feminist utopias and arcadia is apparent. Mattapoisett is an arcadian idyll where human contentment and natural balance are characteristic features. As I have pointed out earlier, arcadia has its

problems. To preserve social harmony, human diversity must be controlled through utopian organization or modifications of human nature. However, if harmony presupposes more than self-restraint it is difficult to argue that Mattapoisett enables individual freedom and diversity. Although Piercy has made alterations in Mattapoisett that further egalitarian ideals, the alterations may rather turn into an oppressive system that limits individual freedom.

Piercy sees power hierarchies as the fundamental cause restricting individual freedom, yet other factors contribute in corrupting a good society. Piercy supports More when he defines greed as a human trait that needs to be watched out for. Greed has the potential to cause conflict among individuals in a society. The Mattapoisett era supersedes a period referred to as the “Age of Greed and Waste” (*WET* 240). Still, Luciente, Connie’s guide in Mattapoisett, disagrees with how the historical shift between the “Age of Greed and Waste” and their time is presented in a holi.¹² In her view male domination was the real source of corruption. To blame females equally is a faulty stance:

The image of struggle was a male and a female embracing and fighting at once, which resolved into an image of two androgynes. Yet the force that destroyed so many races of beings [...] was only in its source sexist. Its manifestation was profit-oriented greed [...] I can’t see male and female as equally to blame, for one had power and the other was property. (*WET* 210-11)

Luciente defines the problem as the uneven power balance between the sexes. Greed, the desire to possess always more, is made possible by this imbalance. It involves competition and an aspiration to surpass others that leads to misuse of power and oppression. In a society aiming for equality and individual freedom personal greed has a devastating effect. As a cure, therefore, Piercy, like More, abandons the use of money, and supports communal ownership.

¹² A holi is a three-dimensional film.

While Piercy accepts greed as a factor that produces discord in a society, female oppression is caused by power hierarchies. More imagines Utopia in line with patriarchal tradition, a society governed by a group of morally superior men. Their pre-eminence enables them to set aside private needs, take on a servant role and govern in a just way that benefits society. Piercy, however, argues that a hierarchical society does not offer all its citizens the same opportunity to administer their own lives. People are not acknowledged and valued as individuals, and personal qualifications are only appreciated as far as they fit into the position or role one occupies in the social hierarchy. Feminist utopias, Carol Pearson claims, “usually begin by showing how women are profoundly alienated and limited by patriarchal society” (50). Power hierarchies take away both freedom and responsibility from the individual. In Mattapoissett, where individual freedom is tied up to communal responsibility, social hierarchies that prevent individual freedom are out of the question.

Utopia and *Woman on the Edge of Time* therefore differ in what they see as natural and cultural causes of oppression. More prescribes male domination as a result of biological differences. In Utopia each household is under authority of the eldest male. “Wives are subordinate to their husbands, children to their parents, and younger people generally to their elders” (*U* 60). To Piercy, however, such hierarchies are not the result of biology, but are culturally determined. Men, by virtue of being men, occupy the influential positions in society. This will inevitably lead to misuse of power and cause oppression. Yet men as individuals are apparently not her main target, but rather traditional assumptions connected to gender roles allowing men to dominate. A good society therefore has to alter traditional ways of organizing society that maintain sexual differences and present them as inevitable. A restructuring of society where equality is the organizing principle will provide individual freedom for all. In contrast to *Utopia*, Piercy recognizes family structure, education, work and

religious belief systems as areas where reorganization is required to promote individual freedom within an egalitarian society.

In Utopia the household is “under the control of their oldest male relative” (*U* 59), yet being a husband and father does not involve absolute power. The Utopian father ensures that family members do their duties, while he also provides for them according to Utopian standards. As Hanan Yoran points out, the Utopian family is “not much more than an agency of control” (9), and remains a stable unit only as long as it benefits the community. There is no privacy or family life, people can go in and out of houses as they please, and families can be split up and moved about according to where they are most needed. The utopian system is not only oppressive to those who find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, like women and children, but limits every Utopian’s freedom.

Unlike Utopia’s oppressive families, individual freedom exists within Piercy’s reorganized family. In Mattapoissett people do not live with their family, but “among” (*WET* 72) their family. While children live in separate children’s houses and are a common responsibility, adults have their private space in addition to communal family areas. Biological families traditionally define women as nurturers. A feminist goal is therefore, according to Firestone, to break the “tyranny of the biological family” (12). In Mattapoissett genetic bonds do not exist within the family, and family members are either “pillow friends”, involving a sexual relationship, or “sweet friends”, a platonic friendship. Marriages are non-existent. A relationship between grown-ups is a private matter as long as it does not disrupt social harmony, and partnerships do not involve privileges of any sort. It is an individual choice to join a family, and to decide when the commitment should come to a halt. No hierarchies exist within the family; rather the family is a household of friends. Apparently Piercy manages to create families that fulfil the feminist ideal of equal responsibility.

However, family life in Mattapoisett causes conformity. Every family unit, following the same basic pattern, involves households of friends with a lifestyle according to norms decided upon by the community. Mattapoisett's free families have developed into social institutions with strict rules that discipline human behaviour. While Utopian families secure social stability, families in Mattapoisett ensure full equality and prevent any form of oppression. In both works, however, family life erases diversity and limits individual freedom.

Adults in Utopia and Mattapoisett combine work and education, and both societies stress education as a life-long process. Education in Utopia, however, is a forced rather than a voluntary activity. According to Raphael, Utopia does not exhaust people. That is "just slavery" (*U* 56). The working-day is six hours, and all "the rest of the twenty-four they're free to do what they like" (*U* 56). Yet the claim is immediately modified. The Utopians are not free "to waste their time in idleness or self-indulgence" (*U* 56). Every Utopian is obliged to make proper use of her time, and "everyone has his eye on you, so you're practically forced to get on with your job" (*U* 65). In the morning people attend public lectures. Those who "haven't the capacity for intellectual work" (*U* 56) rather "choose" to spend the extra time on their trade. Lunch and supper start with "improving literature read aloud" (*U* 63), and during the meals the elders interrogate younger persons to reveal "character and intelligence" (*U* 64). In Utopia education and work occupy most of their day. Rather than being voluntary and aimed at personal development, it favours the community. A skilled workforce is more useful. Besides, people constantly occupied in organized activities are prevented from disrupting social harmony. Utopia wants useful citizens who contribute to the communal good, not independent thinkers questioning and opposing the system.

Education and work in Mattapoisett aims to offer self-fulfilment, yet it also secures conformity. In contrast to Utopia which distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary

work, Mattapoisett defines all types of work as “production” (*WET* 267). Equal status prevents new hierarchies based on people’s usefulness. People are encouraged to follow their dreams, and choose work that suits their abilities. Yet Frances Barkowsky’s observation that Mattapoisett is “not a world without privileges or differences in status” (70), is confirmed by the population. People are valued according to “what they’re good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings” (*WET* 214). Specializing in one field is not approved of, since it makes people “stupid [...] and self-important” (*WET* 267). Rather, in Mattapoisett they “admire each other for taking chances for the common good” (*WET* 277). Luciente asks: “How can people control their lives without spending a lot of time in meetings?” (*WET* 154). People, who do not attend meetings, will be asked why. If one fails to carry out family duties, one will be asked to leave. The claim that one is free to decide how to spend one’s own time does not hold up under scrutiny. Exclusion is the consequence of idleness. The pressure towards making proper use of one’s time in Mattapoisett, similar to Utopia, involves both individual perfection, and an ability to cooperate and adjust one’s own needs according to the needs of the society as a whole.

In Mattapoisett, as in Utopia, education and work overlap, and communal demands are given higher priorities than individual needs. In Mattapoisett people “never leave school and go to work. [They are] always working, always studying” (*WET* 131). The possibility to finish “the year’s quota” (*WET* 267) in one go, makes Mattapoisett’s system more flexible. Still, nobody is free to choose differently. Individual freedom, as Jackrabbit explains, is restricted to occupational choice: “If that’s the work I want to do, I don’t have to pass a test or find a patron. But I still have family duties, political duties, social duties, like every other log” (*WET* 267). Everybody has to participate in the obligatory work, and what they choose to do in addition to that is a bonus. Every seventh year they are rewarded with a “sabbatical” (*WET* 131). However, even if they are off production for a year, they still have to fulfil family

duties. As a feminist utopia, *Woman on the Edge of Time* underlines that responsibilities traditionally assigned to women are everybody's duties. Equality and an upgrade in value of traditional female tasks are the main considerations concerning work, yet it involves restricted freedom and conformity. Therefore, if individual freedom is the aim, Piercy's alterations of family life and work are too limited.

In Utopia religious activity is not as voluntary as it is claimed, but rather an oppressive system supporting social stability. Compulsory universal doctrines make Utopia's claim of religious freedom ambiguous. Utopos¹³ forbade his people to believe that there is no life after death, and that "the universe functions aimlessly, without any controlling providence" (*U* 101). The Utopians believe in "one Supreme Being" (*U* 98), and they all take part in religious activities. The dead observe every individual's movements, and "discourages any bad behaviour in private" (*U* 103). The Utopians are under constant surveillance. Work, religion and education socialize people into submissiveness and obedience, and individual freedom is totally absent.

In Mattapoisett traditional religious conformity is replaced with a new set of rituals intended to promote individuality, yet with a drive towards conformity. Mattapoisett claims that "god is a patriarchal concept" (*WET* 104). Religious beliefs linked to a divine being are rejected as oppressive. In contrast to Utopia, people in Mattapoisett do not believe in an afterlife; one simply ceases to exist after death, and worshipping is not a communal activity. However, there is a religious foundation present in Mattapoisett, which rather translates as an inclusive communion with a natural order. Luciente sees them as "partners with water, air, birds, fish, [and] trees" (*WET* 125), and she says: "We have a hundred ceremonies to heal us to the world we live in with so many others" (*WET* 278). The rituals reflect their central

¹³ Utopos is the founder of Utopia (*U* 50).

belief; preserving diversity while simultaneously forming a unity. The worming¹⁴ ritual includes a chant, but they do not speak in “unison” (*WET* 207), and the singing in Jackrabbit’s burial is a “muffled blurry sound people have when they’re not trying to sing in unison” (*WET* 311). Even though they are individuals, the connectedness involves an obligation towards other people. Thanksgiving, for example, has been replaced by “[t]hanksmaking” (*WET* 174) where they fast for twenty-four hours before they “go around asking forgiveness from everyone [they] have offended in the year past” (*WET* 174). This is reminiscent of the practice in *Utopia* where women once a month “kneel down at home before their husbands [...] to confess all their sins of omission and commission, and ask to be forgiven” (*U* 107). “Religious” rituals confirm the impression that individuality in Mattapoisett is false. Minor variations exist, yet the available options are strictly limited. Conformity, rather than individual freedom, is the dominant characteristic of Mattapoisett.

Uniformity apparently has a different purpose in *Utopia* than in *Woman on the Edge of Time*; in *Utopia* it promotes conformity, in *Woman on the Edge of Time* it removes sexual and racial markers. Still, equality in dress erases individual differences. The Utopians do not only conform to the standards of *Utopia*, but, as Chris Ferns points out, “they must be *seen* to conform” (*Narrating* 112-13, emphasis in original). Identical clothes erase individuality, and turn individuals into types. In Mattapoisett uniformity blurs traditional gender and racial roles. Connie initially mistakes Luciente for a man, and on her first arrival in Mattapoisett she finds it difficult to determine people’s sex based on physical appearance. People wear “unisex rompers” (*WET* 75) in different colours, and while cultures are preserved¹⁵, the traditional link between race and culture has vanished. Moreover, “romance, sex, birth, children” (*WET* 251), traditionally part of the domestic and female sphere, are not “women’s business anymore”

¹⁴ A worming is a session where people who disagree meet and try to solve their disagreement.

¹⁵ Different villages choose different cultures. The people of Mattapoisett are “Wamponaug Indians” (*WET* 103), yet they have broken “the bond between genes and culture” (*WET* 104).

(*WET* 251), but equally applicable to males and females. Luciente says: “We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness” (*WET* 104). Yet diversity is not a probable result. Piercy erases traditional hierarchies and differences to achieve “no more power for anyone” (*WET* 105). However, obliterating individual differences make people identical, rather than diverse.

Contentment with the present state in Mattapoisett does not mean that the possessiveness is gone, but rather that other values are considered more important. Chris Ferns’ claim that “possessiveness has vanished along with private property” (*Narrating* 207) is not supported in the text. Luciente admits that she always thinks of “more things to spend credits on than [she has] credits” (*WET* 248). However, selfishness in connection to materialism is not regarded as positive: “We are born screaming Ow and I! The gift is in growing to care, to connect, to cooperate” (*WET* 248). Sharing and self-restraint are necessary for individual growth. Greed, the opposite, is an assault on harmony and involves satisfying one’s own needs at the expense of others. As a feminist utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* accepts use of persuasion and agreement to maintain social order. Harmony in Mattapoisett may involve more than compliance with social norms and self-control.

The balance between individual and communal needs in Mattapoisett favours the collective. In Utopia individual freedom is a hoax intended to present Utopia in a favourable light. Mattapoisett’s motto “person must not do what person cannot do” (*WET* 101), however, provides individuals with an absolute authority over their own lives. Still, Mattapoisett depends on people volunteering. Important projects cannot always be postponed, and they are fighting a war. Curtis claims that people in Mattapoisett who choose not to join the army are “supported” (156) in their choice. However, when Jackrabbit is trying to decide on whether to “mother” (*WET* 223) or attend military service, the “family” contributes to his decision: “everybody decided I ought to take care of going on defense before starting to mother. I know it’s logical, but I feel a little parted” (*WET* 223). Obviously it is a communal rather than an

individual choice. Consensus, a typical characteristic of feminist utopias, makes the boundary between forced and voluntary activities ambiguous. Mattapoisett's ideals are also attached to a certain conduct that favours the collective. Luciente says: "Different strengths we respect. Not weaknesses" (*WET* 182), and Jackrabbit asks: "it's not always bad to die, is it?" (*WET* 160). Courage is highly regarded and stimulates people to take risks in order to feel included and appreciated. Volunteering for defence is not as voluntary as it is claimed to be. In Mattapoisett courage and strength have gained certain connotations which favour the collective more than the individual, and consensus is used to bring people in line.

Raphael's claim that Utopia requires "very few laws" (*U* 87) is a contradiction. Robert Fisher maintains that, as essentials to a good life, justice and freedom becomes the most important themes of utopian writing (242-43). Raphael's praise of the Utopians as virtuous people who do not need laws shows no coherence with Utopia's reality. In addition to usual crimes, travelling without a passport, discussing political questions outside the council and adultery are all crimes that qualify for severe punishments. In Utopia there are "no opportunities for seduction, no secret meeting-places. Everyone has his eye on you" (*U* 65). The Utopians are not virtuous and free, and, though Utopia lacks written laws, control and legal sanctions have the same disciplining effect. Utopian control, however, has no limits, but intrudes on people's privacy. In Utopia human virtuousness is not really the issue. Rather, social regulation obliterates all forms of individual initiative and freedom.

Whereas Utopia's laws are static, Mattapoisett treats each offence individually. The judicial system of Mattapoisett pursues the aim of individual responsibility, flexibility, and a just treatment of offender and victim. There are no fixed penalties, and only violence and murder are defined as crimes. Atonement is negotiated between the offender and the victim in the presence of a judge. When the criminal has made up for the misdeed, her future prospects are not wrecked, but a second chance is granted. A crime of violence, however, is marked

with a small tattoo on the offender's palm that remains after the sentence is served. People avoid talking about the offence, but still, the tattoo is stigmatising and ambiguous. It is possible that the tattoo is meant to have a deterrent effect, yet it can also be a way to segregate individuals with a moral standard below the norm. The latter explanation suggests that there are hierarchies in Mattapoisett that single out unworthy members as a distinct group. The tattoo seems odd since Piercy makes a point of the fact that offenders after atoning receive the same opportunities as other members of society. The tattoo, however, identifies Mattapoisett's pariahs and becomes a life sentence.

Human relationships are regulated both in Utopia and Mattapoisett, but while Utopia uses external control, people in Mattapoisett display self-control in interaction with other human beings. When Luciente and Bolivar are not communing, for example, a "worming" (*WET* 207) or a gathering where every family member has a say, is called for. A referee from a different township hears out the arguments before she settles the dispute. Personal dislike hinders cooperation, and is not a private matter. In Mattapoisett people are expected to behave civilly. The community is precious, and behaviour that disrupts harmony must be eliminated. If a worming is not sufficient, alternative forms of punishment may be required: "Both may be sent into temporary wandering. We may impose invisibility. [...] Persons aren't allowed to speak for two months to or about each other" (*WET* 207). Mattapoisett may not have laws, but unacceptable behaviour is punished. Cramer's claim that people in Mattapoisett "enjoy community because they have preserved privacy" (231) is inaccurate. As Utopia, Mattapoisett controls human behaviour normally seen as private, and privacy is restricted to their private space.

Impatience with criminals is apparent in both societies, yet while Utopia emphasizes criminals' communal value, Mattapoisett focuses on personal security for the population. In Utopia slavery is preferred to capital punishment, since "live workers are more valuable than

dead ones” (*U* 85). Criminals can also be pardoned if the atonement is successful, or else “they’re just slaughtered like wild beasts” (*U* 85). In Mattapoissett the impatience with violent behaviour is obvious, and Ann Lane points out that violence is typically absent in feminist utopias (xxiv). In Mattapoissett people who turn to violence are advised to consult a healer. A second offence, however, causes execution since the community “aren’t willing to live with people who choose to use violence” (*WET* 209). Utopia executes to get rid of troublesome citizens. Mattapoissett’s reasoning, however, seems more legitimate: to secure other people’s individual freedom the population needs protection against violent attackers. Both societies prioritise communal concerns over individual considerations, and at the same time they get rid of people who are not willing or able to adapt to social norms.

Utopia and Mattapoissett are engaged in wars, yet the claimed self-defence is ambiguous. W. B. Gerard and Eric Sterling assert that people in Utopia see war as a “necessary evil among humanity, but strenuously distance themselves from it in every possible way” (85). This claim can hardly be justified. Utopia’s military strength compared to its neighbours’ turns Utopia into a super-power imposing obedience on foreign territories by conquering colonies, bribing foreign spies, and using mercenaries in battles. Mattapoissett’s war is less aggressive and defensible. After all, they are merely fighting what appear to be machines. Jackrabbit is killed in the war, yet it does not seem to affect daily life in Mattapoissett in a significant way. Rather, going “on defence” (*WET* 266) is comparable to any other activity. As in Utopia, the alleged war threat does not seem to hold up to scrutiny.

However, Piercy’s attitude to violence and war is ambiguous, and breaks with the feminist tradition. An arcadian society is founded on the assumption that human nature is good. Provided for in the best possible way, human beings will be able to live peacefully together. Executions within Mattapoissett contradict this view. Piercy, although she claims to view human nature as good, shows throughout the novel that human nature is not entirely

good even when they are offered the best possible conditions. By justifying use of violence, Piercy, like More, states that people must be controlled in order to create a good society. To achieve social harmony Mattapoissett uses oppressive methods and various forms of punishment. This is, however, a shift towards utopian organization and control.

Connie fights her own war against doctors who aim to control her by implants in her brain, but she has to be influenced by the utopian community to realize that she has to fight. Chris Ferns suggests that if *Woman on the Edge of Time* is merely about Connie's visit to Mattapoissett, its form seems "little more than a 1970s update of the traditional model" (*Narrating* 209). Yet Mattapoissett's influence on Connie, he adds, causing "an individual growth towards becoming fully a person" (*Narrating* 211), separates *Woman on the Edge of Time* from traditional utopias. Ferns has a point when he claims that Mattapoissett closely parallels traditional utopian societies, and I agree that Mattapoissett does not diverge sufficiently to be able to cater for individual freedom and diversity. Ferns interpretation of *Woman on the Edge of Time* corresponds closely to Moylan's definition of critical utopias. In critical utopias, according to Moylan, the protagonist's contact with utopia causes a radicalization in the protagonist which makes her join the struggle for utopia. This is the quest of critical utopias, and utopia is "useless unless one acts towards making it real" (145). Still, I believe it is important to consider what kind of influence utopia represents. Action based on manipulative persuasion is different from acts based on well-founded reflections. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, I suspect the former is the case.

Connie's murders in *Woman on the Edge of Time* are by some critics interpreted as autonomous acts, yet her vulnerability makes me doubt this is the case. In Connie's real world Sybil¹⁶ explains the purpose of the experiment: "Control. To turn us into machines so we obey them" (*WET* 200). Moylan describes Connie as a "terrorist" (139) who succeeds "in her

¹⁶ Sybil is Connie's fellow inmate and friend. She is also part of the medical experiment.

guerrilla action” (146). Libby Falk Jones agrees. Connie’s murders are, according to her, “clearly an achievement of the self, an assertion rather than a submission” (125). Vara Nevarow asserts that Piercy makes “it very clear that resistance must be entirely voluntary, not coerced” (31). According to these critics Connie is fully aware of the implications of the murders. In spite the fact that she has nothing to gain, she kills the doctors to help Mattapoisett into existence. However, Connie’s decision to poison the four doctors is clearly influenced and encouraged by her utopian friends. Bee¹⁷ names her “a prisoner of war” (*WET* 328), and when Connie waits for the right moment to pour the pesticide into the doctors’ coffee and asks Luciente if she is doing the right thing, Luciente’s reply is a confirmation: “When did [power] get destroyed peacefully? We all fight when we’re back to the wall” (*WET* 370). To Mattapoisett Connie is part of a greater plan, and Connie interprets herself as “enlisted [...] [in] Luciente’s war” (*WET* 301). As Utopia uses “Venalians” (*U* 94) as mercenaries, Mattapoisett uses Connie. After all, she is not the only mentally unstable, undervalued person who has been contacted. If Mattapoisett’s future existence depends on terrorism rather than democratic decisions, it limits the scope of diversity within Mattapoisett. Individual freedom remains a token ideal, and the emancipating power of utopia is replaced by ingenious persuasion and manipulation.

Moylan’s assessment of Mattapoisett as a “liberated future society” (127) is flawed. Moylan describes critical utopias as utopias that do not “limit the imagination to one particular ideal” (42), but rather express a “willed transformation against all types of exploitation and domination” (35). As I have pointed out, rules and regulations in Mattapoisett strictly limit diversity and available choices. There is lack of coherence between Moylan’s criteria for critical utopias and his analysis of *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a

¹⁷ Bee is one of Luciente’s lovers in Mattapoisett.

successful critical utopia. Mattapoisett's oppressive system does not seem to deserve the term critical utopia.

Mattapoisett's egalitarianism rests on its ability to achieve even distribution of power. Unlike Utopia, Mattapoisett has abolished all social hierarchies that control individual freedom, and individuals can claim "I want" (*WET* 122). Yet, in order to avoid trespassing on other people's conflicting needs common consensus is a condition. Private choices are available only within limiting borders drawn up by the community as a whole. Individuals are given the opportunity to affect decisions in a democratic way, and resolutions are constantly renegotiated, but this is not sufficient to claim that people enjoy individual freedom.

In Mattapoisett, as in Utopia, the population speaks in terms of "we" rather than "I". While Mattapoisett initially seems to be an arcadian society, conformity, forced consensus and various forms of punishment push Mattapoisett towards utopian control. Piercy wants equality. Yet people who adjust their lives according to a fixed ideology are not living independent lives. *Woman on the Edge of Time's* revision of *Utopia* tries to overcome the problem of oppression, but fails. Like *Utopia*, it ends up restricting individual freedom for the communal good.

4 - *The Dispossessed* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*: Freedom and Order

Contrasted

As a utopian narrative *The Dispossessed* is difficult to label, yet it deals more directly with individual freedom and social order than *Utopia* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Le Guin's main focus is how human beings experience a far from ideal utopia. I will in this chapter attempt to show how Le Guin questions utopian arrangements similar to the ones found in Mattapoisett. Her conclusion is that every system can be corrupted, and therefore end up as oppressive.

The Dispossessed reveals oppression while it simultaneously shows how individuals can regain autonomy. Moylan's assessment of *The Dispossessed* as a "flawed, critical utopia" (120) seems mistaken. His view is that *The Dispossessed* presents a "nostalgic look to the older ideological message of the genre that emphasized the perfect utopian system [...] [rather than] a breakthrough to a critical expression of an open-ended utopian imagination" (114). In my view there is lack of coherence between his definition of critical utopias and his analysis of *The Dispossessed*. Contrary to *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Dispossessed* manages to describe a utopian society offering the possibility of diversity. In this chapter I will point at how Le Guin's portrayal of Shevek's counterattack on repressive forces, exposes where traditional utopias thread wrong. Shevek's struggle to regain autonomy becomes a renewal of the utopian tradition which rejects conformity and enables individual freedom.

Woman on the Edge of Time attempts to reconcile individual freedom and social order to achieve a harmonious society. In contrast, Le Guin in *The Dispossessed* purports that harmony as a goal restricts individual freedom. Harmony as a lasting condition presupposes an orderly society in which all the different variables are known. Le Guin suggests it is not possible to forecast human behaviour in all situations. Attempts to depict a harmonious

society rather reveal a unity based on conformity and strict practices. In extreme cases, such an emphasis on social organization would make human beings puppets.

Le Guin points at unruly human nature as a factor influencing the balance between individual freedom and social order. In Le Guin's view human nature is not entirely good, but as social beings, humans are able to recognize social relations and community as beneficial to self. The wish to belong and be included helps socialization, and individuals learn to adapt their own needs to social limitations. Complete socialization in all individuals, however, is not possible. In a community there will always be individuals who for some reason refuse socialization, either deliberately or because they are unable to control themselves. While both instances may reveal social failure, deliberate refusal is a positive sign suggesting that individual autonomy and responsibility exist within the community.

Natural scarcity turns mutual aid into a necessity, yet it also opposes cooperation and reinforces selfishness. Moylan claims that Le Guin fails to show that society benefits from utopia's superiority. Therefore, Anarres' scarcity does "not pave the way for utopia as much as for individual moral excellence in the face of adversity" (102). However, when people lack, survival instincts become particularly visible and dominate socialized skills like sharing and cooperation. Hard living conditions on Anarres, in contrast to Mattapoisett, also highlight the need for social organization and a flexible workforce. Anarres' population of one million people is completely isolated, and totally dependent upon communal efforts. Survival presupposes sufficient production in a harsh environment, where scarcity in periods even causes starvation. A centralized system of distribution is required. Technological innovations have not been able to free the population from hard physical labour, and emergencies threatening their livelihood make sudden work transfers part of everyday life. Cooperation comes close to obedience, and is not a matter of moral excellence. On Anarres, necessity tips

the balance between individual freedom and social order in favour of social order, resulting in diminished individual freedom and stagnation.

A living society is marked by diversity, and in Le Guin's view diversity is not consistent with harmony. In contrast to Piercy and traditional utopias, like *Utopia*, Le Guin claims that the goal of social harmony is likely to promote stagnation rather than progress. She rather favours a society in process, in which ideas and ideology are constantly being questioned. To achieve this, society needs human beings who are willing to take risks and challenge mainstream assumptions. Harmony should therefore never be considered as finally achieved. That might be a sign that the concern for social stability has stifled freedom. Individual freedom presupposes personal responsibility, which cannot exist within a system enclosed by a defined set of rules.

The systems of Mattapoisett and Anarres, intended to balance individual freedom and social order, appear deceptively similar. Both societies are founded on communal ownership combined with individual freedom. Still, while Piercy maintains that such a system can be created, Le Guin warns about possible pitfalls in attempting to create the perfect system. Shevek's criticism of oppressive forces on Anarres is a negation of the possibility of perfection. While Piercy follows the traditional utopian pattern and describes social arrangements in detail, Le Guin's main concern is how the arrangements affect people. Human nature has not been altered in *The Dispossessed*; rather the characters' weaknesses and failures are realistic and recognizable. While humans have a natural inclination for solidarity and mutual aid, they also have a will to power and domination. Old habits may become a trap causing people to stop questioning the usefulness and consequences of established practices. A fixed system offering limited freedom tends to mislead people into believing that they are truly free. A good society, however, needs to nourish and educate the

positive traits of human nature, and the process has to be repeated for every new generation. This involves constant changes to avoid a system that promotes stagnation and conformity.

Centralization, as a result of scarce resources, creates power hierarchies on Anarres. Odo, the female founder of Odonianism,¹⁸ was aware of the dangers of centralization as a source of oppression. Anarres was to have “no controlling center, no capital, no establishment for the self-perpetuating machinery of bureaucracy and the dominance drive of individuals seeking to become captains, bosses, chiefs of state” (*TD* 95). Yet Odonianism was developed on the twin moon Urras which had the natural resources needed for allowing the population to live in small self-sufficient units. In this respect Urras is comparable to Mattapoisett in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. As a peaceful, arcadian idyll Mattapoisett escapes some external obstacles that may stifle individual freedom. On Anarres, however, a central administration is needed to coordinate the work of the syndicates, and to distribute manpower and goods. When the settlers first arrived on Anarres, The Production and Distribution Coordination, or PDC for short, “discriminated very carefully [...] between administering things and governing people” (*TD* 167). But society has evolved, and the need for expertise and stability makes people remain in stable positions. Bedap, Shevek’s childhood friend, says: “stability gives scope to the authoritarian impulse” (*TD* 167). A bureaucracy gradually accumulating power has developed on Anarres.

Anarres lacks an official government, and avoids misuse of power by replacing elected representatives regularly, but Anarres’ growing bureaucracy destabilizes the democracy. On Anarres, as in Mattapoisett, volunteers are selected by lot, and are only allowed to remain in the syndicate for a limited period. However, advisors and experts, officially not granted a vote, are the ones who really govern Anarres. The non-institutional authority on Anarres is hard to pin down, yet it seems to exist everywhere. Sabul, the leading physicist of the Central

¹⁸ Odonianism is Anarres’ anarchist communist ideology.

Institute of Sciences in Abbenay, is one of them. As the Press Syndicate's consultant on manuscripts in physics, his approval is necessary for printing. Shevek experiences his power when he wants to publish his work. Only by allowing Sabul the position as co-author is he able to get it printed. Centralization has a tendency to attract individuals who want power. While this possibility was accounted for when developing the system, the system cannot prevent power-seeking people from manoeuvring into positions. People's naiveté, search for predictability, and fear of change, reinforce the negative trend.

Expertise gathered in a small area creates an intellectual elite susceptible of misuse of power. Centralization, allowing specialised groups which may shape and control public opinion to develop, can therefore maintain power hierarchies and preserve the status quo. In Mattapoisett the direction of scientific research is the result of public discussions and voting. Researchers check "each other's work. Done by lot" (*WET* 278), and everybody is equally informed what "would be consequences on the whole yan-and ying of it" (*WET* 277). In order to work, the system requires involvement and a high level of general knowledge in the public. Discussions are necessary to reveal facts and different positions. Mattapoisett expects its citizens to spend a considerable amount of time in meetings, but it is a system based on trust. Mattapoisett's experts are believed able to set aside personal convictions, and rather inform the community in a neutral way enabling each individual to make independent decisions.

On Anarres holding back information or providing an unbalanced view about Urras manipulates people into seeing Urras as a threat. Shevek and his juvenile friends discuss the information they receive about Urras in their history class, when Tirin¹⁹ says: "All the material on Urras available to students is the same. Disgusting, immoral, excremental. [...] If it was that bad when the Settlers left, how has it kept on going for a hundred and fifty years?" (*TD* 43). Information about Urras is hardly unbiased. However, people in general have no way

¹⁹ Tirin is Shevek's classmate before Shevek leaves for Abbenay.

of confirming or refuting it. In a highly developed society it is unlikely that people can be informed equally well on all issues, and in this case bureaucrats both have a personal and social motive for spreading false propaganda. The political bureaucracy is concerned with retaining their own positions and privileges. Also, protection of “traditional interests and goals, beliefs and values” (Sabia, “Individual” 123) is, in Dan Sabia opinion, equally important. Common consensus on Anarres is shaped by a combination of deliberate manipulation of facts, ignorance and fear of the unknown. I believe Le Guin attempts to show that our beliefs and actions are not always the result of our own well-founded opinions. Public opinion and custom become powerful tools strongly affecting people’s attitudes and actions.

While human diversity is challenging because it usually results in different perceptions of information, the ability of humans to reason and conclude by themselves is a quality that furthers progress. Tirin’s doubt about the information the Anarrestis receive on Urras shows that the human psyche has its own ways, and does not always respond in the expected way. The functioning of the human brain, how the input is processed and connected to previous knowledge, cannot be predicted. Attempts to control people by feeding them certain propaganda may consequently fail. While Moylan describes the relationship between Anarres and Urras as “static and not dialectic” (104), I think Moylan’s description rather serves to describe how the governments on Urras and the bureaucracy on Anarres want the relationship to continue. Shevek’s journey, however, teaches him that his knowledge of the Urrastis is incomplete: “they were not the gross, cold egoists he had expected them to be: they were as complex and various as their culture, as their landscape; and they were intelligent; and they were kind” (*TD* 77). Shevek’s prejudices are shaped by the information he has received on Anarres, yet personal experiences tells him that an adjustment is required. In the long run people are not content with just drifting along. Reality has to make sense, or it must be changed to correspond to the perceived image.

Mattapoisett sees privacy as necessary for protecting individual autonomy. Still, the risk is that privacy may turn into possessive individualism reducing communal feelings. A place of one's own, Mark Tunick suggests, is essential for preserving individual freedom: "Privacy can provide an important emotional release from the effort we make to be civil and polite" (140). Mattapoisett grants its citizens an escape from social restraints, a private sphere. Privacy, however, may become self-absorbing, and reduce the sense of community. Mattapoisett removes the possibility. Privacy is non-existent within social contexts, and social interaction, even in the family, relies on a conduct that conforms to the communal ideal. Private space becomes a compromise making it more feasible to cope with social demands in other situations.

In contrast, Anarres emphasises community. Privacy, linked to notions of possessiveness and self-preservation, is believed to undermine communal goals. Anarres puts forward complete openness as an ideal: communal dining halls, dormitories, no sealed letters, and no private phone calls. Private conscience and fellow citizens' observant glances keep people in line. Privacy is limited to what goes on in your mind; privacy begins "at the skull" (*TD* 163). Private space is "a value only where it serve[s] a function" (*TD* 111). Dormitories and communal areas are more efficient. A child sleeping alone is a sign that it has been a nuisance to the others in the dormitory, and is no longer tolerated. Apart from sexual activity, "there [is] no reason for not sleeping in a dormitory" (*TD* 110).

The attitude that privacy is waste is internalized in Shevek. When he first arrives in Abbenay²⁰ he is not entirely comfortable with receiving a private room. Yet after weighing "the moral discomfort against the practical advantage" (*TD* 112), he finds that the usefulness of his work justifies a private room. On Anarres brotherhood has replaced the family, and since families share, sharing is a guiding principle which has become part of people's

²⁰ Abbenay is the town functioning as the administrative and political centre of Anarres.

consciousness. When Rulag, Shevek's mother, visits him at the hospital after twenty years of separation, she asks: "We aren't, except biologically, mother and son[.] [...] All that is time past, irrelevant. But we are brother and sister, here and now. Which is what really matters, isn't it?" (*TD* 124). A life in openness strengthens the communal feeling, and underlines the importance of brotherhood rather than private human relationships on Anarres.

Anarres rejects privacy, but the ideals are not always lived up to. Shevek reacts against the dishonesty he sees in other people. His neighbour Desari has his room "full of stuff that he [has] no right or reason to keep" (*TD* 155), and another neighbour, Bunub, lives alone in a double "which given the housing shortage, [is] egoistic of her" (*TD* 259). Tunic points out that "possessiveness seems to be innate and must be overcome by socialization" (139). As a baby in the day-care centre Shevek is pushed away from his spot in the sun by another baby. He bursts into tears and screams: "Mine sun!" (*TD* 27). The matron, however, corrects him: "Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it" (*TD* 27). Anarrestis are socialized into sharing in an attempt to get rid of private property and privacy, but we learn that different forms of possessiveness still exist. People fail to live up to their ideals, make excuses, or try to conceal their hypocrisy.

It is difficult to decide whether Le Guin sees possessiveness as inevitable or something that can be obliterated. Shevek reflects upon sharing under two very different circumstances. On Urras he is invited for dinner at his colleague Oiie's house. When Oiie's son Ini passes him the pickles, Shevek does not thank him. Anarres custom requires thanksgiving only when it is a gift, not when it is sharing. Ini, however, does not find Shevek's manners very polite. Still, when Shevek asks him if he wants the pickles back, he has to admit that he does not like pickles. Shevek comments: "That makes it particularly easy to share them" (*TD* 147). On a different occasion Shevek's train to Abbenay breaks down, and has to stop in a little town for 20 hours. He and the other 450 passengers have fasted for sixty hours and are starving, but the

town people do not have enough food to share. Some passengers plan a raid on the town, but before they manage to put the plan into action, the train is ready to depart. Shevek reflects on the incident: “It [is] easy to share when there [is] enough, even barely enough, to go round. But when there [is] not enough? Then force enter[s] in” (*TD* 256). Sharing is considered a good thing, but does not always produce the same, or even the intended, result. When discussing moral issues, it is tempting to generalise and produce one correct answer. Yet the circumstances differ, and what is correct in one particular situation, is not necessarily correct every time. Le Guin does not provide the reader with correct answers; she rather points at dilemmas, and encourages the reader to make her own judgement.

On Anarres relationships between children and parents and between partners follow certain norms. Unlike Mattapoisett these norms are suggestive and developed through customary behaviour, rather than being mandatory and arrived at by common consensus. Most children are separated from their parents and move into dormitories at the age of two, and partnership is “a voluntarily constituted federation like any other. [...] It [is] not an institution but a function. It [has] no sanction but that of private conscience” (*TD* 244). Mark Tunic sees partnerships as serving an important function on Anarres: “contrary to critics who see pro-family sentiments as a capitulation and obstacle to achieving an anarchic communist utopia, [...] they are an appropriate recognition of the need for institutions that mediate between the ideals of individuality and community” (142).

While Rulag suggests that companionship is sufficient for human happiness²¹, Takver is not contented with brotherhood and occasional love affairs. She had noticed Shevek four years previous to their hiking tour in the Ne Thereas. Without making any claims on him or addressing the issue, she has made up her mind that if she cannot live with him, she prefers a

²¹ The episode when Rulag visits Shevek at the hospital is further explained on pages 55-56

life in celibacy. When Shevek notices Takver's interest in him, she says: "I need the bond, [...] [b]ody and mind and all the years of life. Nothing else. Nothing less" (*TD* 180).

In Mattapoisett, by contrast, indiscriminate human relationships are possible as long as they pose no threat to communal obligations and the ideal of equality. People can choose a life in celibacy, they can remain with one partner, or they can choose to have several partners. Different sexual orientations enjoy equal status: "All coupling, all befriending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That's not a useful set of categories" (*WET* 214). Tolerance seems to characterize human relationships in Mattapoisett. Still, as Michelle Erica Green points out, Mattapoisett "ignore, erase, and repress other differences among people" (167). Luciente's love affair with Diana developed into "a binding" (*WET* 64), and Sojourner²² explains why it had to end: "Your binding with Diana kept you from working well" (*WET* 212). In Mattapoisett it is likely that Takver and Shevek's partnership would have been termed oppressive and therefore unacceptable. In Mattapoisett individual freedom is freedom from being controlled by other people. Any private feelings which involve submissiveness or a wish to dominate others are restrained. The result is superficial relationships which do not undermine equality.

Partnership involves a shift in focus from communal to private needs, and a commitment towards one's partner that causes diminished autonomy. Shevek is ambivalent. Influenced by Anarresti custom upholding partnership as oppressive, he leaves Takver for an emergency posting. In his letter he writes to her: "I had begun to give less, as if I possessed you and you me and there was nothing more to be done" (*TD* 252). When he returns to Abbenay and Takver is no longer there, he questions social demands on individuals: "he had given up his book, and his love, and his child. How much can a man be asked to give up?" (*TD* 258). Moylan's depiction of Shevek as "aided by lovers who are not equal co-workers

²² Sojourner is one of Luciente's family members.

and partners but rather stimuli for the solitary activity of the hero" (110) seems unfounded. Shevek needs his family for his own well-being, and it represents stability and continuity in his life. Rather than pose a threat to his autonomy, Takver's love and support increases his perceptiveness and helps him in his work. Takver helps him to feel included rather than alienated from society. However, it is a mutual relationship, and Takver writes to Shevek: "separation is educational all right but your presence is the education I want" (*TD* 253).

Unlike Piercy, Le Guin does not see human relationships as merely oppressive, but attachments involve personal integrity and responsible behaviour towards one's partner. Outward rules and regulations attempting to control human relationships are superfluous, and end up denying people the possibility to develop true human emotions. To preserve individual freedom, the involved parts must be able to negotiate their own rules. Le Guin draws a clear line between social interference and private matters. Social intervention into people's private relationships promotes conformity rather than secures individual freedom.

In Mattapoisett artificial reproduction provides a win-win situation for women, men and children. Nonetheless, it offers no freedom of choice. In Luciente's words, pregnancy and birth cause women to be "biologically enchained" (*WET* 105). While women in Mattapoisett share "the power to give birth" (*WET* 105), men as nurturers become "humanized to be loving and tender" (*WET* 105). Children also benefit. Freed from the oppressive dominance of biological mothers, children become independent individuals. Childcare spread on more hands assures that children are no longer a "burden" (*WET* 183). Patrocínio Schweickart claims that Mattapoisett "nullifies the role of the father as it universalizes that of the mother" (qtd. in Shands 76). In Mattapoisett men are "male women [...] marked more by the absence of masculinity than the positive presence of femininity" (76). Marge Piercy agrees. Children do not need oppressive fathers, they need "mothering; that is, nurturing, loving, teaching, being held, being comforted" (*Parti-Colored* 101). Besides, the only way men can become

human is through direct contact and responsibility for children (*Parti-Colored* 101).

Therefore, as Pia Thielmann suggests, Mattapoissett shows “men who are not the oppressive enemies for women, but rather similar to women, from breasts which they can develop to

nurse babies, to the caring, nurturing character” (111). Artificial reproduction is also, as

Dennis M. Lensing points out, “a *sacrifice* on the part of women” (93, emphasis in original).

Mattapoissett does not offer the full range of reproductive choice. In fact, there is no choice.

Artificial reproduction and breast-feeding men make men and women more identical.

However, as Alice E. Adams states, artificial reproduction “preserves the patriarchal fear and distrust of the mother” (208). Piercy confirms prejudices against biological mothers. The only

way to overcome imbalance in power between mothers and children is through artificial

reproduction. Consequently, artificial reproduction will advance children’s individual

development. However, Piercy not only signals distrust in biological mothers’ nurturing

abilities, she completely overlooks positive aspects. In her view biology has no significance,

rather all connections between human beings are culturally determined. Men and women are

offered equal opportunities, but artificial reproduction confirms prejudices both towards men

and women. Erasing differences between the sexes is a drive towards conformity rather than

preservation of difference.

The viewpoint expressed through Takver in *The Dispossessed* agrees with Luciente’s:

pregnancy causes oppression of women. However, the reason is human biology rather than

male oppression. Men and women, aware of the fact that pregnant women are controlled by

“the most primitive kind of sacrifice impulse” (*TD* 331), ought not to exploit the situation.

The experience of having children, though, weighs up for the lack of autonomy pregnancy

involves. Takver simply states: “It was lovely, having Sadik!” (*TD* 332).

While Piercy sees drastic alterations of men, both physically and mentally, as

necessary for men to change from oppressors to nurturers, Le Guin does not see men and

women as totally different. Parental feelings are equally latent in both sexes, and biological alterations are therefore unnecessary. A society which opens for intimate contact with children and simultaneously provides childcare to ease the burden of parenthood is the best option for parents and children. As a gay man Bedap has not considered parenthood. Pilun's²³ fragile body and trustfulness arise a wish to protect her, and when she calls him "tadde", it gives him the "most extraordinary pleasure" (*TD* 361). Shevek comforting his eldest daughter, makes Bedap feel useless and excluded from the intimacy between them: "I never took the time. And the time's going to run out on me, all at once, and I will never have had ... that" (*TD* 370). While Moylan claims that Bedap is "devalued [...]" as a man who regrets his choice of not parenting" (111), I think Le Guin wants readers to see that the wish to nurture exists in people even though the circumstances do not provide for it.

Rulag's²⁴ experience of the contradiction between social expectations and biological needs confuses her. When she visits Shevek at the hospital she explains why she left Shevek and his father: "He was supportive, he was parental, as I am not. The work comes first, with me" (*TD* 123). On Anarres she only did what was expected of her – Anarres wants parents to reject the parent-child bond. Still, the decision haunts her. When Rulag meets Shevek as a grown-up man, love towards Shevek is replaced by confusion and hatred, since the "guilt"²⁵ (*TD* 364) she feels is not supposed to be there.

Le Guin, however, does not attempt to romanticize being a parent. Sole charge for their newborn baby Sadik leaves Shevek with a "sense of being necessary which is the burden and reward of parenthood" (*TD* 248). As with partners, Le Guin suggests that child-parent relationships are not necessarily oppressive. I am not convinced, however, that Rulag is the "cold, hard, rejecting and narrow-minded" (132) mother Sarah Lefanu claims she is. When

²³ Pilun is Shevek's second daughter.

²⁴ Rulag is Shevek's mother.

²⁵ After a meeting in PDC where Rulag openly shows her dislike for Shevek, Takver explains Bedap that Rulag is Shevek's mother. Bedap bursts out: "and she hates us because of him. Why? Guilt?" (*TD* 364).

Rulag leaves Shevek as a baby, she listens to experts' advice and custom rather than her own heart, and misses out on something important. Society has to enable parents to become good nurturers by offering alternative arrangements for childcare, but denying people family life is oppression of difference. While Moylan asserts that Le Guin displays a "heterosexual, monogamous nuclear family bias that undercuts her textual assertions of personal emancipation" (101), I think she rather suggests that the nuclear family ought to be one available option among other alternatives.

Anarres' original educational aim agrees with Mattapoisett's educational programme: providing children with a teaching able to encourage individual initiative and self-confidence. Nevertheless, they both end up limiting children's freedom. In Mattapoisett individual tuition in theory stimulates the child's curiosity, and reflects society's commitment towards individual freedom. However, children working together with adults, discussing with adults during meal-times, and socializing with adults, will eventually pick up the same habits. Adults as always present role-models transfer favoured virtues to children. Children's interests are formed by society, and a certain amount of control is incorporated into the system.

On Anarres autocratic teachers and a fixed curriculum have turned Anarres' educational programme into an oppressive system. Lack of cohesion between educational ideals and practice makes Sabia see education as a "manifestation of Anarresti corruption" ("Utopia" 195). Bedap criticizes the educational system for adopting rigid practices. Children are not born Odonians, freedom has to be "trained in each individual" (*TD* 168). Yet the system has become "rigid, moralistic, [and] authoritarian. Kids learn to parrot Odo's words as if they were *laws* – the ultimate blasphemy!" (*TD* 168, emphasis in original). Within the educational system pressure towards conformity has replaced individual initiative. Children are not encouraged to think for themselves. Repetitive tasks have replaced original production, and conformity is the result. Anarres fears changes; society's achievements must

be preserved by communal efforts which demand everybody's contribution. Children and adults diverging from the established norms are seen as a threat, and must either be socialized into accepting social needs, or excluded. Education on Anarres no longer provides for individual freedom, but aims at compliance to strengthen communal ties.

Shevek's talents and lack of conformity make him stick out from the crowd, and turn him into a target for socialization and exclusion. Le Guin's choice of protagonist is in Moylan's view problematic. As the "solitary savior" (106) he keeps other more revolutionary characters in the novel "at the periphery and thus rendered less important" (106). However, on Anarres Shevek is not, as Ferns points out, "one of a kind" (*Narrating* 223). Rather, he "represents a threat to certain tendencies within utopia, namely those toward stasis and conformity" (223). Shevek, a talented boy, feels alienated from society. His ability to find solutions to complex physical questions is not appreciated. On the contrary, the director humiliates and expels him from the group: "Speech is sharing – a cooperative art. You're not sharing, merely egoizing" (*TD* 29). Shevek's progress is hindered by persons who fail to recognize his talent and the social value of nurturing it. To Shevek isolation becomes painful, and he submits to the skill of "waiting for his turn, waiting to share, waiting for a share" (*TD* 31). The socialization is relatively successful, and at the age of twenty-one Shevek's morality is "fitted to a rigid mold, the simplistic Odonianism taught to children by mediocre adults, an internalized preaching" (*TD* 155). Shevek sees the Anarresi society as flawless, and his feeling of seclusion becomes a sign of personal failure rather than social failure. Anarres curbs his individual freedom and disables him from doing his work. Shevek unintentionally becomes a social misfit.

Shevek, helped by Bedap, eventually realizes that established norms and a bureaucracy resisting change restrict individual freedom on Anarres. The Physics Federation rejects the course Shevek wants to teach in physics with the excuse that "there isn't enough

demand for it” (*TD* 160). After eight years at the Music Syndicate conservatory, Salas is a skilled music teacher. Nonetheless, the Music Syndicate does not like his music, so he is only offered postings in “unskilled labor” (*TD* 174). Teachers, who somehow oppose the establishment, are rejected postings as teachers. Children are left with average teachers who conceal their own insufficiency by dominating children. Rather than encouraging and stimulating individual development, they are an extension of the Anarresti bureaucracy making children conform. Anarres’ emphasis on communal values dominates individual needs. Originality and personal initiative is a threat to social stability, and must be defeated. Anarres’ educational system is therefore not able to educate children according to its own ideal. Diversity is replaced by conformity and a rigid educational system.

On Anarres the impartial system of work-postings serves to maintain equality, but it also demands compliance. The Division of Labor office, Divlab for short, provides an overview of vacant long term postings which individuals can select from. The system combines qualifications and tasks, and secures that individuals are offered vacant postings within their chosen field. Work nobody really wants is shared equally. Unhealthy or dangerous postings therefore only last for half a year, and rotating lists organize maintenance work so that everybody contributes one day in a decad.²⁶ Even though Shevek personally does not see coercion as an efficient or necessary means of obtaining a communal spirit, he is aware of the danger of public opinion: “There is no other reward, on Anarres, no other law. One’s own pleasure, and the respect of one’s fellows. [...] [T]he opinion of the neighbours becomes a very mighty force” (*TD* 150). Yet again the ideal does not correspond to reality. The social conscious has outweighed individual freedom. People do not make use of the right to refuse postings, even though they try to convince themselves that it is a possibility.

²⁶ A decad is a period of ten days.

In Mattapoisett social conscience combined with individual rewards causes obligatory work to be felt less restrictive. People are awarded leisure time, a sabbatical every seventh year, and simultaneously as they do compulsory work, they also work within their chosen field. Still, the social pressure demanding personal involvement is also present in Mattapoisett. In an attempt to balance individual freedom and social demands, individuals may have to compromise and accept enticements as part of the deal. People in Mattapoisett use compulsion and reward as incentives for work. The terms are openly negotiated to achieve a balance between individual advantages and obligation. Fear of exclusion, however, is likely to affect individual decisions. Mattapoisett's system does not offer individual freedom as it claims to do. Rather, compulsion to follow the norm leads to conformity.

On Anarres the system of work-postings, like all systems, can be corrupted, and rather than promoting individual freedom results in conformity and oppression. People unwilling to comply are free to withdraw and take the role as hermit. People who do so are referred to as "nuchnibi" (*TD* 150). Through Bedap Shevek gets acquainted with people rebelling against the work-posting system: "intellectual nuchnibi who [have] not worked on a regular posting for years" (*TD* 173). Somehow the nuchnibi's skills have not been registered at Divlab. As a result they are not offered posting within their profession, only unskilled labour. They do not know who makes the decisions, and how to complain; they are powerless victims sanctioned by an invisible, unimpeachable system.

Work-postings have become duty rather than free choice. People think about objecting to postings, but never do. Shevek finds that "the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate – we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbour's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice" (*TD* 330, emphasis in original). Le Guin shows how a system designed to balance individual freedom and social demands ends

up as oppressive. Individuals may have a tendency to embrace systems which create an orderliness and predictability. All systems, however, can be corrupted. By staying alert and constantly evaluating the consequences of a system, it is possible to uncover undesired side effects. Yet to believe that a system can be perfected and made valid in all situations is a mistake. Continuous reversals and changes are necessary to adapt the system to a frequently shifting reality. While Piercy maintains that a system designed to address individual freedom and equality will remain just, Le Guin sees habitual ways of doing things as stagnation that limits individual freedom.

The democracy on Anarres is corrupt, and political equality is prevented by randomness and concealed motives. When Shevek and Bedap attend a meeting in the PDC and want them to sanction Shevek's journey to Urras, they are threatened that people who plan to return to Anarres will "find their teeth knocked down their throats and their balls kicked up into their bellies" (*TD* 357). Tirin's²⁷ play was interpreted as "anti-Odonian" (*TD* 169), and Bedap explains how public reprimand has become a tool to get rid of dissidents: "It used to be how they cut a bossy gang foreman or manager down to size. Now they only use it to tell an individual to stop thinking for himself. It was bad" (*TD* 169-70). When Tirin finishes his education as a math instructor, he only gets postings as unskilled labour in rural areas. Eventually he ends up in an asylum. People who openly disapprove of political decisions and established norms are intimidated or excluded. On Anarres, with no boundaries between private and public life, education, work and political life are closely connected. Lack of compliance therefore has a devastating effect involving all parts of life. The oppressive forces allow freedom within restricting boundaries, and people's fear of exclusion is the only deterrent Anarres needs. Individual freedom does not strike a balance with social order, and Anarres has become an oppressive society.

²⁷ Tirin is Shevek's childhood friend. He is a playwright and an actor.

Woman on the Edge of Time assumes that in spite of conflicting opinions, values and desires, human beings are able to overcome their differences, yet the question remains whether Mattapoisett is a diverse society marked by conflicting views. We learn that Luciente's jealousy, causing her to compete with Bolivar for Jackrabbit's attention, cannot be tolerated: "First, they need not like each other to behave civilly. Second, we believe many actions fail because of inner tensions" (*WET* 207). Bolivar and Luciente have to change their behaviour to overcome the problem, but getting rid of inner tensions is equally important. Pretending to like each other is not enough. While Moylan maintains that Luciente and Bolivar are "helped to meet together to work out their differences" (141), I rather think it is a forced reconciliation. Outwardly Mattapoisett is a diverse society consisting of people of different races, sexual orientations, and cultures, but I have to agree with Green who claims that the differences are only "skin deep" (168). In Mattapoisett dissidents who have withdrawn from society, sit apart in the communal dining hall. As on Anarres, people feel uneasy in their company, but sympathy rather than resentment: "they may wander from village to village sourer and more self-pitying as they go" (*WET* 101). Drifters have been given the opportunity to change and adapt to society's demands. Their failure to adjust is a private responsibility more than societal flaws, and in Mattapoisett there is no room for diversity. Kerstin Shands states that for Piercy it is sufficient "to point to the *process* toward harmony, equality, balance between humans and nature, union without unity" (82, emphasis in original). However, I do not agree. Piercy does not present Mattapoisett as a perfect society, yet in my view the conflicts among people are not convincing. The diversity is not of a nature that cannot be reconciled, and social harmony is defined as an obtainable goal.

Le Guin, however, maintains that diversity causes conflicts, and a society which presents itself as harmonious oppresses and obliterates differences among people. Shevek is often caught between conflicting interests. When he decides to go to Urras, he is aware that it

may cause disturbances. However, he is not prepared for the scope of the conflict: he is physically attacked, Takver is excluded from her research team, and their daughter Sadik is isolated and intimidated by other children and adults in the children's dormitory. He could have chosen to give up his work and remain on Anarres, but the basic principles on which Anarres is founded are too essential:

If we must all agree, all work together, we're no better than a machine. If an individual can't work in solidarity with his fellows, it's his duty to work alone. His duty and his right. We have been denying people that right. We've been saying, more and more often, you must work with the others, you must accept the rule of the majority. [...] If [revolution] is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin. We can't stop here.

We must go on. We must take risks. (*TD* 359)

Shevek's view is in conflict with the majority view, but Anarres's commitment to individual freedom verifies his right to pursue his own interests. A complete reconciliation is unlikely, and Anarres will somehow have to deal with diverging opinions.

Woman on the Edge of Time and *The Dispossessed* conceive the progress towards a good society differently. In Mattapoisett Luciente is convinced that a continuation of what they have already achieved will improve the situation further: "Someday the gross repair will be done. The oceans will be balanced, the rivers flow clean, the wetlands and the forests flourish. There'll be no more enemies. No Them and Us" (*WET* 328). The system is believed able to balance individual freedom and social order, so the possibility of improvement lies in people's ability to perfect self-control. Paradoxically, this is a drive towards even more conformity. Curtis finds Piercy's attitudes towards artificial reproduction "unproblematic [...] because it is not an attempt to make better people in any genetic sense" (158). Yet in my view, Mattapoisett's attitude to artificial reproduction underlines the conformity pressure and the fact that certain qualities are valued more than others. While the conflict between the

Shapers and Mixers²⁸ has not been solved yet, it is still acceptable to reproduce Jackrabbit's "exact genetic mix" (WET 323). Mattapoisett's mistake is precisely attempting to interfere and control human beings – emotions, relationships and biology in a way that destroys what is truly human. Mattapoisett's system may work for idealists concerned with adapting to a certain ideology, but the options seem too narrow for human beings who want to live full lives.

Moylan's definition of critical utopias as utopias which, compared to traditional utopias, "in a transformed and liberated form" (42) offer "a radical critique which seeks human emancipation and fulfilment" (43) apparently suits *The Dispossessed* better than *Woman on the Edge of Time*. As I have tried to show, Mattapoisett's oppressive system is similar to the coercion found in *Utopia*. *The Dispossessed*, however, is different. On Anarres Shevek's revolution activates a renewal of the anarchical ideology. A central issue is the restoring of the obligation towards personal initiative and individual freedom. Anarres does not attempt to narrow down the options, but to allow for diversity. Le Guin presents different alternatives without offering any solutions, but she sees human relations and emotional bonds as essential to the well-being of individuals. Holding back may prevent suffering, but it is not freedom. Human emancipation demands responsible individual freedom and diversity.

²⁸ "The Shapers want to intervene genetically [...] [and] breed for selected traits" (WET 226) while the Mixers "only spot problem, watch for birth defects [and] genes linked with disease" (WET 227).

Conclusion

Certainly there must be some unity in a state, as in a household, but not an absolute total unity. There comes a point when the effect of unification is that the state, if it does not cease to be a state altogether, will certainly be a very much worse one; it is as if one were to reduce harmony to unison or rhythm to a single beat. (Aristotle)²⁹

As the above quote by Aristotle shows, the contradiction between individual freedom and social order is not new, but rather something the human race has grappled with for quite some time. Absolute social harmony seems to be an impossible as well as an unattractive goal. Different people have different needs, and absolute harmony involves restraining human needs in a way that is not compatible with individual freedom.

In comparison with *Utopia*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* expands the utopian genre, yet in a way that limits rather than secures individual freedom. In *Utopia*'s patriarchal society harmony is the result of a strict social order. Mattapoissett, however, erases differences between the sexes and modifies human nature to accomplish equality and a harmonious condition. As a feminist utopia, it has done away with hierarchies that deny women the same privileges and rights as men. Yet equality has a serious encumbrance – it obliterates diversity and causes conformity. Luciente tells Connie: “some problems you *solve* only if you stop being human” (*WET* 125, emphasis in original). Human transformation in Mattapoissett suppresses authentic human qualities, and the end-result is a society where conformity in accordance with defined norms and oppression dominate. Piercy's attempt at creating a harmonious society where individual freedom balances social order, fails.

²⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book II, Chapter 5 (qtd. in Davis 11).

Piercy, however, also has a different agenda, and her main goal with *Woman on the Edge of Time* is to propel forward a feminist revolution. Luciente asks Connie: “How come you took so long to get together and start fighting for what was yours?” (WET 177). Mattapoissett is the result of a revolution where people finally “*did* get together” (WET 154, emphasis in original). Yet revolution involves common goals, struggles and sacrifices – repressing private needs for the communal good. Sojourner in Mattapoissett, ready to mother at the age of 74, says: “I had myself sterilized so that I wouldn’t be tempted to turn aside from the struggle” (WET 250). Freedom in Mattapoissett is not individual freedom, but a restrictive freedom that deludes people into believing that they are free. Mattapoissett’s oppressiveness is even worse than Utopia’s. While Utopia’s control stops with the human body, Mattapoissett, in the name of equality, transforms bodies and alters the human psyche to control people. Piercy does not want individual freedom, but equality. People may be good, but they cannot be trusted. Equality is accomplished by human transformation, but the consequences are conformity and reduced freedom.

The Dispossessed is an optimistic warning. Mitis, Shevek’s tutor in physics, warns him before he leaves for Abbenay: “Don’t let false egalitarianism ever trick you” (TD 58). Utopia’s freedom and Mattapoissett’s feminism are achieved through rigid systems, and represent “false” egalitarianism. *The Dispossessed* offers a critique of both the utopian genre and feminist ideas of the 1970s, and is able to present a utopian society which takes diversity seriously. *The Dispossessed* maintains that a system alone does not generate a good society. Rather, it is people who comprise a society that ensures liberty. Anarres’ revolution is not a revolution demanding conformity, but a revolution “in the individual spirit” (TD 359).

The Dispossessed is a further expansion of the utopian genre, but in contrast to *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Dispossessed* succeeds in its commitment to individual freedom. Le Guin believes in autonomous human beings. A good society requires people who are able to

develop a critical stance and willing to confront what they consider to be wrong. Thus, socialization and an informed citizenry become key factors in Le Guin's good society. However, on Anarres the "law of evolution" (*TD* 220) underlines that it is not individuals' physical strength that guarantees survival, but social skills. Compassion and cooperation cannot be developed in individuals working on their own. Human evolution requires feedback from other individuals to avoid stagnation. Nourishing relationships therefore become an essential part of human progress. Human alterations, however, are unnecessary; only a society where individuals are encouraged to challenge moral assumptions is required.

A balance between individual freedom and social order remains a utopian dream, and is perhaps best left as one. Harmony must never supersede autonomy. Attempting to deal with disagreements, conflicts and violations of laws through strict regulation do not improve human beings, but merely limit their freedom. Yet, as Le Guin suggests, a democracy where one can both agree and disagree, offers the best foundation for a good society. While human beings may be selfish and greedy, they are also compassionate and cooperative. Le Guin is hopeful.

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